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Preview

To My Readers

Also by Annette K. Larsen

Author's Note

About the Author



Annette K. Larsen

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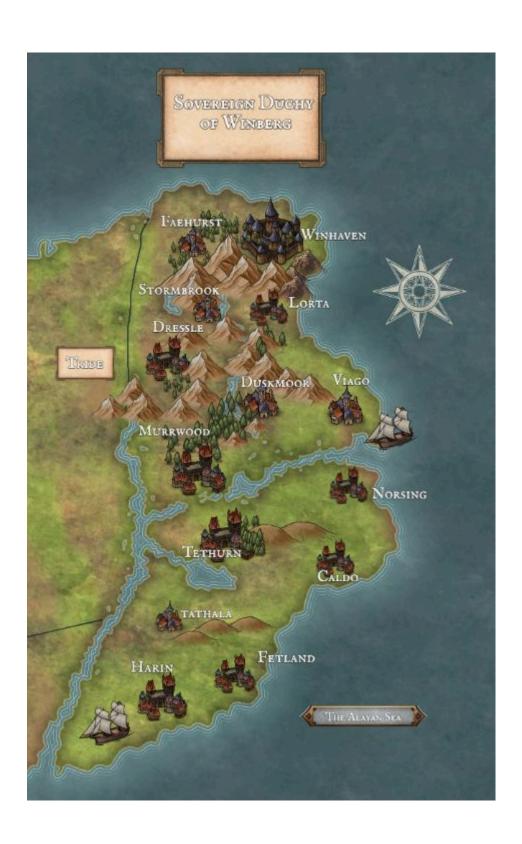
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For the wild girls.

The ones who buried themselves to accommodate the expectations of others.

The ones who only unearthed themselves after they stepped into adulthood and decided that they were enough.

And to those who are still trying. May we all find our soul voice.



Elise

I rifled through the contents of the wagon, stuffing fistfuls of my belongings into my satchel. The voices yelling back and forth outside were a mercy. I didn't have to sneak and be quiet, I could just be fast. Speed was what I needed most if I were going to escape my brothers.

At first I only grabbed my belongings. Clothing, shoes, a hairbrush, a bundle of dried meat and nuts, a water pouch, and a thin bedroll. Then the jangle of a purse caught my attention. Money. Of course I had to take money with me. I grabbed the purse and took a few precious seconds to look for more. Leaving my brothers was my first priority, but money would get me much farther. I found another handful of coins and a gold brooch. They'd be furious to find me gone, and even more furious when they realized I'd taken any coins, but I didn't feel guilty. I'd earned this money. As one of the three infamous Wolfe siblings, I'd performed and bewitched and collected coins from audiences that were always dazzled by the act we put on. Our unique wagon had been built to resemble a great beast or wolf, and I always played the damsel in distress in our dramatic act. It was a performance we'd worked hard to hone and improve, and the audience loved it.

I was done being the damsel in distress.

Looking around the dark wagon interior one more time, I wrapped my cloak around me and threw the satchel across my back. I'd lived my life in this wagon, curled up in my corner. I'd done everything I was told in exchange for the assurance that my brothers would take care of me. But today, they had been the ones to injure me. They'd been the ones to throw me in the hold beneath the wagon as punishment for daring to stand up for

someone. The only reason I was free now was due to the kindness of a complete stranger.

I owed my brothers nothing but contempt, and I refused to live under the combined misery of their violent hands and oppressive heels any longer.

So I slipped out the door and down the two small steps at the back of the wagon, grateful that the strangers who had pulled me from the hold still had my brothers restrained and distracted.

I jumped to the ground and ran into the woods, thankful for the dark night that hid me. The village of Murrwood was just north of here, which meant I would have to skirt the peddlers' camp in order to go there. I didn't expect anyone would notice my departure. They were all captivated by the spectacle of my brothers arguing with those they had wronged. So I hurried through the trees, anxious to put as much space between me and my brothers as possible.

"Elise!"

I spun to see who had called out to me, smothering a scream and clutching at my heart as I searched the darkness. I quickly spotted someone hurrying toward me, but his lanky figure calmed my frayed nerves. It was only Robert.

"Where are you going?" he asked as he came to an abrupt stop in front of me.

I shook my head. "I don't know. I just have to go."

"But—"

"I can't stay with them anymore." My voice shook. This was the bravest thing I'd ever done. It was probably also the most foolish.

"But where will you go?" he asked.

"I don't know. Anywhere away from them."

His face was pulled down in worry and confusion. "How will you live? How will you eat?"

Robert White and I had known each other for years. At fifteen, he was only a year older than I was. We traveled with the same crowd and worked the same festivals much of the time. This was the only world either of us knew, so his worry was not unfounded. Traveling alone wasn't smart, but it was my only choice.

"I took some money," I said, trying to sound optimistic. "And I know how to work a crowd."

"Yes, but without the wolf wagon..." There was skepticism in the twist of his mouth and the crater of his brow.

"I'll be all right. It will be an adventure." My confidence sounded false, and I closed my eyes on a sigh. "It will be hard. I'm not a fool; I know it will be hard, but I have to go. I have to try."

He still looked concerned. "Well..." He looked about, as if lost for words, his eyes going to the ground and then me and then his hands. "Here!" he said suddenly, tugging on the gloves he wore. "It will be cold at night. Maybe these will help." He held them out to me, his face earnest.

I swallowed down the lump that clogged my throat at the thoughtful gift, reaching out tentatively to take them from his hands. "Thank you, Robert," I whispered.

He nodded, giving me an almost-smile. "Stay safe."

I backed up a few steps. "Don't tell them you saw me." Though I didn't think Robert would ever betray me, I thought it better to state the obvious.

"I won't," he promised.

I gave him as much of a smile as I could muster and then fled through the trees.

I ran from my brothers, from the family that was supposed to love me but who'd misused me instead. I ran toward the wide-open, cruel world, the world they had told me would chew me up, abuse me, starve me, and leave me for dead. I went into the world fully expecting that my days would be filled with darkness, pain and hunger.

But I wanted more, and I thought that maybe, just maybe, I could have it. Because the girl who had helped me escape was just like me—and yet so very different. I lay awake that night and wondered why someone who was seemingly just as insignificant as I was could have so many people willing to come to her aid. When my brothers took her, she hadn't been forgotten. The people she knew hadn't shrugged off her disappearance the way my brothers had shrugged off my mother's. This girl's friends had searched for her, *fought* for her.

Lying all alone with nothing but the stars and rustling leaves for company was so much lonelier when I considered that there could be more. Lonely... but strangely hopeful. I had a plan, and perhaps it was pure naiveté, but I had hope that somewhere in this upside-down world, I would find a life better than the one my brothers had given me.

Whether I found that better life or not, first I had to meet the cruel world head on.

Traveling on my own was arduous and frightening, but I pressed on in the direction of the village of Dressle. My brothers and I had already been to the festivals in Caldo and Norsing, and they would no doubt continue to follow our usual route south to Tethurn, so I was going north to Dressle. It was fortunate that I'd separated from them in Murrwood. The village of Murrwood was almost exactly in the middle of Winberg and thus was visited by festival rats who traveled both of the main routes. One occupied the northern half of Winberg, the other traveled through the south, and only in Murrwood did they overlap. The next southern festival, in Tethurn, didn't start for another three days, so most of the travelers going that way had chosen to stay camped in Murrwood Forest for the past week. The travelers making their way through the northern half of Winberg had left for Dressle several days or even a week ago. I wouldn't make it there before the festival started, but at least it was a known route, and I was hopeful that I would only miss a day or two.

It wasn't an easy journey, and it would have made more sense for a lone girl on foot to go to Duskmoor, which was closer and the terrain less mountainous. But if my escape was ever going to work, I couldn't just go to the closest village. Duskmoor's festival had occurred several weeks ago, so I wouldn't find work there. In order to find work and safety, I had to go further, up into the heart of the mountains. My brothers wouldn't think me capable of such a thing; they would assume I'd take the easy way, and I was counting on them underestimating me. I was also counting on their unwillingness to take our giant wagon up into the mountains. That's why they had always stayed south—easier roads to prowl with the wolf wagon.

As I journeyed, I kept the stories my mother had told me close at hand, trying to draw on their strength and imagine that I too could live a story worthy of telling—or at least one that didn't end abruptly in tragedy. The tale my mother had recited most often was that of the mother of wolves. It was no mystery why that was a favorite. She and I were Wolfe women, after all. But I took comfort in the story of that old woman—the hag who had lived life, conquered it even. With all the experience and wisdom she had

gathered, that old mother of wolves had the gift of life. She could gather the lifeless bones from the desolate ground and sing them back to life. She could put even the most broken of men back together. She was a fairy godmother of sorts, and seeing as how I was a Wolfe and she the wolf mother...I liked to think that she looked after me.

My mother had always told the story a little differently, so I never quite knew if the mother of wolves lived in the dark woods or in the sandy desert. Was she woman or wolf or both? Was she ninety-nine years old, or was she a thousand? Dripping in colorful beads or dressed in rags? The story was always different, but no matter the details, I knew that the wolf mother sang.

Perhaps that was why I wanted to try my hand at being a songstress. That and the simple practicality of performing by myself. There were a good number of solo performers at the fairs, but most were men. Magicians, jesters, stilt walkers, jugglers. Of course, there was the occasional woman who occupied such roles, but I didn't have those skills.

I could sing though. I'd been singing to myself for as long as I could remember, and enough people had commented on the clarity and ease of my voice that I had some confidence in it. It was a skill I possessed, and an honest one too. Still, I'd never used my voice to attract an audience, so I would need all the practice I could get.

As I traveled, I kept an eye out for fellow travelers. If they allowed it, I would sing a little song while sitting around their fire and I would watch their reactions. Which songs captivated? Which notes regained their attention?

My first two evenings on the road, I encountered small groups in the evenings who had welcomed me, and one was even willing to share their meager meal.

On the third night, I made the mistake of accepting a drink.

I came upon them at dusk. The group consisted of four men and two women. I called out a greeting and one of the women came to meet me. "Are you on your own?" she asked.

"For now" was my vague answer since I did not want to confess just how alone I was.

"Well, come sit down. We've got room enough around the fire."

They were a congenial group, sharing stories and even encouraging me to sing for them. As the evening grew darker, they passed around flasks of

mead and the laughter increased. When a man put a flask in my hand and said, "Drink up!" I saw no harm in it.

The liquid hit my tongue and I didn't know what it was, but it was not mead. After only a few swallows, I gave it back, grimacing at the odd aftertaste and becoming paranoid as I felt its effects almost instantly. I clutched at the log beneath me as I felt off-balance and my head tilted to one side. I sat there for several moments, trying to breathe away the odd feeling, but it didn't subside. I tried to get up, gripped by the sudden urge to run.

A hand pulled me down and pushed another flask to my lips once more. "Drink this," he said. "It will help."

In my confusion, I swallowed, thinking perhaps this was water or something else to counteract what I'd drunk before, but it was only more of the same. I pushed away from it and fell backward off of the log where I'd been perched. I tried to climb to my feet, but whatever herbs or magic the flask contained made me feel small and unsteady, like I was shrinking into the ground and I had no control over my limbs. When a man tried to help me to my feet, the feeling of smallness increased as his laughter rang in my ears and panic bloomed in my gut. My dizziness intensified, and I worried that my consciousness was on the verge of blinking out when a woman's indignant cry broke through my fear. I was jostled and pulled by multiple sets of hands, heightening my panic.

Then only one set of hands held me, and they were smaller than they'd been before. It was no longer a man guiding my movements, but a woman. My mind couldn't quite decipher what that meant, but I knew it was better. She muttered as she guided me along, the meaning of her words never registering fully in my hazy mind, but the anger and indignation were clear. I stumbled beside her, grateful that the laughter was fading behind us. Then everything faded.

I awoke the next morning when someone shook my shoulder. My head hurt, but my eyes were eventually able to focus on the harsh face of the woman crouched over me.

I swallowed hard.

"You'd best steer clear of other travelers if you aren't going to keep your wits about you," she said with a scowl.

Pain, fear and confusion warred within me. "What happened?"

"Nothing, but only because I was there. You understand?" She gave me a look of pity, reprimand, and warning.

I swallowed again, my throat aching. I nodded even though I wasn't sure I fully understood. Maybe I didn't want to understand.

The woman stood, offering me a hand. I took it as I tried to imagine just how much assistance this woman had given me. She pulled me to my feet, then bent to pick up my cloak before putting it in my hand. "Off with you," she said, handing me my pack, which I could only hope contained everything I'd brought with me. Then she jerked her chin toward the dim woods. "Go before any of them wake."

I gave a sharp nod and started walking, astonished that I could be made to feel so small. I put my pack on my back, then threw my cloak around my shoulders to cover it and myself, glancing back only once. The woman stood watching me, but the five other figures were just shapeless mounds around the fire pit that sat cold in the early dawn light. I turned away, continuing on with shaking legs and a pit in my stomach.

I found the stream nearby and drank deeply, knowing that I wanted to flush out any of the sorcery that they'd put in that flask. I drank and splashed water on my face, all the while crying into the stream, adding to its depths. My stomach was unsettled and empty, but I dared not eat any of the meager food in my pack when I didn't know from where my next meal would come. Pulling my pack from my back, I dug inside, grateful when I found the pouch of money and the brooch safely tucked where I'd put them. I'd been lucky. Perhaps that woman had been a wolf mother, there to protect a girl in need. I closed the bag and tried to breathe the tears away.

I needed to make it to Dressle. I needed to be among the festival crowd where I was comfortable and I'd be able to barter and sing for coins and hopefully feed myself.

Saints, what if I'd escaped my brothers only to starve in my first attempt at independence?

I banished the thought, refusing to let such dark possibilities consume me. Forward was the only way to go. So I pushed myself to my feet and followed along the stream as my tears dried on my cheeks.

It wasn't until the next day that I thought to sit down and count the money in my pouch. I poured the contents into my palm and all the air rushed out of my lungs. I pushed the coins around in my hand, realizing there was only half of what I'd originally taken from my brothers. I

swallowed hard and willed the tears away. The conniving men who had given me the strange brew had also lightened my purse.

It took time for the panic to subside, and even longer to recognize how lucky I was that they'd only taken half. And why half? So I wouldn't notice at first? Because they were following their own moral code?

I didn't know, and I never took a drink from a stranger again.

Maddox

She stood in the bright sunlight that slanted through the trees in the clearing where we'd set up our tents and booths. This clearing had trees high enough and far enough apart to provide shade, but also plenty of room for crowds and festival performers. This girl was lithe and graceful, moving through the festival crowd on nimble feet. Her movements were so smooth that she glided among the raucous festival goers, nearly disappearing as she did so. She didn't stand out, and yet at the same time, she did. Her wary eyes and golden hair drew my eye inexorably, keeping my attention. She looked to be, what? Sixteen? Seventeen? Only a couple years younger than I was, and though I was familiar with nearly all of the locals and the traveling performers, I knew I had never seen this girl before.

It wasn't attraction that I felt, not at first, though she was certainly beautiful. It was curiosity. Something about her called to me. I needed to know more.

Two sides of our large tent were rolled up to encourage festival goers to come in and browse. My parents were the most talented costumers and hatters in the realm—or so we liked to say. Nobles would wander in to purchase our shimmering cloaks for their pampered daughters, while the performing acts came to us for costumes and props, anything to liven their performance and draw more of a crowd. After all, if you couldn't draw people in, you'd never get their coins.

When the young woman looked my way, I was fortunate that it wasn't my staring that caught her eye, but my wares.

As she came closer, I knew she wasn't a festival goer coming for a pretty outfit. She was poor, poorer than most of the other travelers I'd seen, guessing from the state of her clothing and the slightly starved look in her

eyes. She was a performer, coming for a costume, though how she expected to afford it, I couldn't guess.

She came right up to our tent and started perusing the wares that sat out front without ever turning her eyes to me. I was tall enough that even seated, I was noticeable, especially since I sat near the entrance of our tent. So the fact that her eyes had not been drawn to me was a testament to her focus.

I took care to be still, happy with the opportunity to observe her unnoticed as she sifted through different costume pieces.

A shout came from outside and I leaned forward so I could see what had happened, but it was only a jester flipping through the crowd.

When I turned back, her eyes were fixed on the half-finished hat in my hands.

"You make these?" She gestured to the tent, which was overflowing with wardrobe pieces.

"I do."

Her eyes moved from the hat in my large hands, to the needle that was stuck into the shoulder of my vest for safekeeping, before her gaze settled on my face for the first time. "You're the owner?" she asked, her mouth pulling to one side. I knew from experience that people assumed I was older because of my height and my full beard. But I was eighteen, and though that was certainly old enough to be considered a man, I still felt my youth.

In answer to her question I shook my head, stunned by the immediate effect that her undivided attention had on me. I swallowed past the tightening of my throat. "It's a family business."

Her eyes remained on mine, unwavering and clear. The discomfort that coiled inside me was not reflected in her expression. She was not affected by my gaze the way that I was affected by hers. I set down the unfinished hat and reached for the cup of tea that my father had insisted I take this morning. Tea was his habit, not mine, but I was grateful for it as I took a sip, hoping to clear the nervousness from my voice.

Elise

It took courage for me to step closer to the young man sitting at the work table amidst so many well-crafted costume pieces. He was well established and clearly knew his business. I tried not to be intimidated, but even sitting down he was as tall as I, and his muscled torso and dark hair created an imposing picture. I just hoped he'd be kind enough to give me a fair price, maybe even help me. "And what would you recommend for a girl just starting out who's trying to make a name for herself as a songstress?"

The young man's brows jumped. "A songstress, are you?"

I nodded, feigning confidence, even though I'd never actually sung for a crowd before. Still, I had a decent voice, and I did know how to captivate a crowd. I also knew that if I were going to capture their attention, especially on my own, I would have to purchase a wardrobe that would draw the eyes of festival goers as I drew their attention with my voice.

The young man set down his teacup, which looked awkward and tiny in his hand, and looked me over with an assessing eye. "What bird shall you be?" he asked.

My lashes and brow fluttered at the idea. "Bird?"

"It's only a suggestion, but a songstress is often named after a bird, and it lends itself to easy costuming."

"Oh." His recommendation left me surprised but grateful to have some direction. "You're right. I suppose..." I looked around, hoping to be inspired by some piece of fabric or head dress. "It depends on what you have on hand. You see, I need something ready made so that I can start working."

A crease of concern appeared between his brows. "Do you have the funds to purchase such an ensemble?"

"Of course. I wouldn't waste your time if I could not pay you." I'd been viciously guarding the money I'd stolen from my brothers for just this purpose, which was why I hadn't bought any additional food. I pulled the coins from my pocket, leaving only three bits in my stash, and put the rest on the desk beside him, my hand trembling as I pulled it away. "I can pay you this much." I stepped back, my heart in my throat, hoping it was enough.

He looked over the coins, then gave a nod. "Very well. We can make that work." His mouth twisted to the side as he studied me further. "Might I suggest a starling?"

"A starling?"

He nodded as though excited by the idea. "Yes, they are not as popular a choice as the nightingale, but also not as drab as a warbler. Black plumage

with purple or green mixed in. Liberally dotted with white. It could be quite striking."

I marveled at how easily he threw out the suggestion. "That sounds perfect, but as I said, I'd need something right away. The festival has already started," I said, looking out at the people mingling together. "It will be here the entire week, will it not?"

He had turned to walk off before I finished my sentence. I followed him into the rows of fabrics and ready-made pieces, watching as he pulled a black cape from the depths of the tent before moving on to a braided basket filled with feathers. He dug into it, and as he pulled the feathers out, I realized they were all attached to different pieces of fabric of various shapes and sizes. He found two thin strips, one covered with dark green feathers, the other with small white feathers.

"No purple?" I asked as I followed him to another corner of the tent.

"Green will complement your coloring better."

He returned to the bench where I'd found him and pulled some thread from a spool.

"The festival will be here the whole week, right?" I asked again, willing him to say yes. I needed this clearing to be packed with crowds for as many days as possible. I needed this costume so that I could perform for those crowds, so that I could start making money. *If* I could make money.

"Yes, it will be going through Sunday."

I sighed in relief. "Good. I'm not familiar with the usual times for festivals up here," I said to explain my worry.

"Most of the sellers and performers came either on Sunday or yesterday." He cut his eyes over to me. "You're new at this?"

"Yes. Well, I'm new to performing by myself at least."

He nodded, his dark-brown hair falling over his forehead as he bent over his task. I pulled up a seat and watched him work for a few minutes, curious how he would do it. The way he handled and manipulated the fabric and feathers spoke to years of experience. He was at peace as he worked, and I wondered if he was a traveler or a local. His ease in this festival spoke of time on the road, but he didn't seem to have the restlessness that most of us carried.

"What will you do after this festival ends?" I asked, hoping he was familiar with the northern circuit and could tell me more about it.

"I'll be heading to Stormbrook next, and then Lorta will be our last stop."

I frowned in confusion. "What about Winhaven?" Winhaven was the capital of Winberg, the seat of the sovereign duke and duchess. Surely they had a spectacular festival there.

He nodded. "We'll take that route next year. The northern mountain prevents us from traveling to all four cities, so each year we either go east to Stormbrook and Lorta, or we go north, around the west side of the mountain all the way to Faehurst and then across to Winhaven."

"You're a festival rat?" I asked.

His mouth quirked up at my question. "I suppose so. Though the fact that my father has an established home and shop here makes us somewhat of an oddity. This is our home, but my father and I travel during the festival season."

I nodded. "A festival mouse."

He turned to me, one eyebrow raising as though unsure if he should be insulted or not. "What?"

I blushed. I hadn't meant to offend, so all I could do was explain. "That's what we call you behind your back. Or, people like you. Your kind aren't as fierce as those of us who grew up on the roads."

His forehead wrinkled, and I could tell he took umbrage at my words. "Having a home makes me weak?"

I shrugged. "Just different."

He dropped his eyes to the cape and made several more stitches before reaching into a pouch on his belt to pull out a small pair of scissors. He cut the thread, then looked up at me. "Do you enjoy constantly being on the road?" he asked. "I've always had a home to come back to, so..."

My heart burned with jealousy at the thought. "Hmm."

He tilted his head, questioning my hummed response. "What?"

"It's a nice idea," I said while my chest tightened with wanting. My mother had been my only real home. "An actual home combined with the freedom to travel." I gave a little shrug. "That would be nice."

He glanced up at me and then back to his work. "Do you not have that?" he asked.

I sat up. "I have the freedom to travel," I said, trying to walk back the vulnerability that I had let seep through.

"And a home?"

Curse him for being a good listener. I let out a sigh. "A peddler's wagon is their home."

"You have a wagon then?" he asked, and I had to wonder why he cared. I looked away. "Not anymore."

His hands stilled. "Then where do you live now?"

I looked him in the eye, making my voice bold as I said, "Anywhere I choose." The last thing I needed was to have a festival mouse doubting my ability to take care of myself, even if I was only fourteen and entirely alone. I wasn't going to trust a stranger again, not after what had happened on the road here.

He just nodded and continued to work, not challenging my assertion.

I took the opportunity to stand and wander about the shop, admiring the intricacy and variety of the costumes they had and slipping my hand into my satchel to finger the coins that I'd so carefully kept hidden, refusing to use any of them even when my stomach twisted with hunger. I knew that hunger was temporary, so long as I could come up with a show, a performance, an act that would bring in the money that I was now solely responsible for making.

I lost track of time as I studied the colorful costumes and let my imagination run with ideas.

"Come put this on."

The young man's words pulled me from my reverie, and I turned to see him standing a few paces away, holding the cape out for me. I quickly wrapped it around my shoulders.

He stepped back to look at me, a smile pulling at his lips. "And the Starling is born," he said with satisfaction.

I swished the fabric, admiring the way he'd dotted white feathers over the entire ensemble but kept the green feathers to trim the neckline. "It's wonderful, thank you." The fabric was voluminous enough to cover my front, which meant I wouldn't need to worry about my dress matching, and there were slits at each side so that I could put my arms through and be free to move.

When I looked up, he was studying me. "Now that I see what was required to make this..." He walked back to his desk.

Oh dear, did he realize my money wasn't enough? Would he ask for more?

He turned around and offered me one of the coppers I had given him. "I think it's only fair that I return this. The ensemble was not elaborate or difficult to put together."

A weight lifted from my chest. "Are you certain?"

"Of course." He wiggled his fingers, prompting me to take the coin. "Plus, I hope to earn your loyalty as a customer. Come back here if you ever need anything else."

I swallowed with some difficulty. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. And might I ask the Starling's name?"

"Elise."

He dipped his head politely. "A pleasure to meet you, Elise."

His smile was kind, so I had to ask, "And your name?"

"Maddox Hatcher. At your service."

I didn't know then just how true his words would turn out to be.

I smiled and thanked him and then left his tent with the realization that now it was time for me to get on with it. It was time to sing and hopefully earn my keep by doing so.

I didn't go far. There were plenty of people milling about among the nearby tents, So I found a little patch of shade and drew on all my years of experience. I stood tall, shoulders back, and reminded myself to gesture wide and throw my voice far. I set my satchel in front of me so that I could keep an eye on it, and so that people could throw their coins on it. I'd have to make a more portable purse later, but this would do for now.

Taking a deep breath, I shook the nerves from my hands and started on a long, high note. Long enough that people couldn't help but turn and look for the source. Then I let my voice fall off of that note and down the scale, sweeping into the narrative with a smile and what I hoped was charisma.

Elise

Singing was more tiring than I had expected. I'd never sung for hours, so I hadn't realized that it was impossible. Over the coming days, I learned how and when to rest my voice. When I wasn't performing, I was rummaging for food or exploring the forest outside Dressle, looking for a place to sleep and grateful that I'd left in the warm months so that I only needed a small fire to keep me warm. The last thing I needed was to be assailed at night because my fire beckoned to the same sort of predators that had given me the tainted drink.

As the sun set, I headed into those woods, grateful for the stream that trickled near the festival grounds. I slumped onto the ground beside it to soak my feet, scrubbing the dirt from between my toes. I had shoes, but I needed to save those for travel. I had no wish to wear them out just walking around the festival, so I'd decided I would go barefoot most of the time. I liked to think of it as an artistic choice, just another facet of the Starling persona that I was trying to build in my head. I felt I was making a good impression so far. At least, I hoped I was.

Today was Tuesday, and since this festival ran Sunday to Sunday, I knew I had less than five days to get my footing, make some money, and then follow the festival rats to the next village.

There were people of all types there in Dressle. Congenial farmers, wornout mothers, crude young men and happy children. I kept my interactions short, hoping not to be remembered—or targeted.

But Maddox remembered me, and he had a family.

The following day, I was singing close to Maddox's costume tent, trying to take up space and capture an audience, when two young girls ran by. They were perhaps four or five years old and similar enough in looks and

size that they might have been twins. They tumbled through the costumes and into the interior of Maddox's tent. A roaring shout sounded from the tent's depths, startling me into silence. My singing cut off and my eyes widened as a booming voice yelled, "How dare you enter this hallowed space!"

The little girls screamed, and my feet moved without my permission. Whatever the girls had done, they did not deserve to be terrified by—

Maddox's tall body lumbered out from between his racks of goods. One little girl clung to his back while the other held on to his leg. "You've awoken the beast!" he growled, raising his arms and curling his fingers into claws. The girls squealed in terrified delight but held tight.

"Now you will become my supper!" Maddox reached back, capturing the girl that clung there, and pulled her around to his front before pretending to munch on her side.

The other girl got to her feet and jumped up, trying to capture her sister. "You leave Twyla alone!" she hollered.

Maddox widened his eyes and looked down at her. "Another snack!" He scooped her up into his other arm, swinging both girls around before setting them back on their feet. They giggled as they found their balance, and I noted that one was a little taller than the other. So perhaps not twins.

I couldn't take my eyes from them. They looked so happy, and Maddox seemed to enjoy being around them. A little seed of envy curled inside of me, but I pushed it aside, reminding myself to look forward, not back.

Maddox

I set down my giggling sisters. "Now," I said as I crouched in front of them. "Where is your mother?"

Both girls shrugged in unison, their eyes wide but not quite innocent. *Not again*. I hung my head, then lifted a hand to press two fingers into my eyes. "Please do not tell me you ran off without telling her again."

I opened my eyes only to see them looking guilty as they repeated the identical shrug.

"Girls..." I lamented with a sigh.

"We just wanted to visit you," four-year-old Didi said as she reached up to put her arms around my neck.

My frustration was difficult to hold on to when she was so sweet. I sat on the ground and pulled her into my lap. "You girls can't keep doing this," I scolded. "You know how worried your mother will be." I looked around, hoping to see Dorothy through the crowd of festival goers. If she was not close—and I suspected she wasn't—I would have to take them home myself. I didn't see her, but I did see the Starling—Elise—watching us with interest. She'd been singing her songs close to my stall the whole day just as she had yesterday, and I liked to flatter myself by thinking that perhaps she did so because she felt safe around me. I certainly felt better when she was in sight. The fact that she was on her own, not making much money and looking starved, made every one of my protective instincts crackle.

Her lack of funds coupled with my current sisterly predicament gave me an idea.

I stood and took each girl by the hand, towing them over to where Elise was trying to resume her song. "Sorry," I interrupted before she could get the first note out.

She looked a little startled. We hadn't spoken since I'd helped her with her costume yesterday. I'd waved to her this morning, but she'd kept herself just far enough away that speaking to her while running the business wasn't an option. "Yes?" she asked.

"I have to ask a favor. My sisters here have escaped from their mother yet again." I shot each of the girls a scowl, but they didn't notice. "I need to return them home, but Dad is at our shop on High Street today and I don't want to leave our wares unattended. Could you maybe sit there until I return?" I grimaced, knowing it was a large favor, especially when she was trying to earn money.

"Oh." She seemed surprised by the request. I could hardly blame her. We were not friends and I had no right to ask favors.

"I know I'll be keeping you from singing, so I can offer you five bits for your trouble," I said, hoping the amount was enough to tempt her, but not so much that it seemed like egregious overcompensation.

Her eyes widened and her hands fisted her black cape. "You overestimate the amount I can earn in so short a time," she protested feebly.

I'm certain I was, but the opportunity not only to protect my merchandise, but to get a few coins in Elise's pockets in the process wasn't something I could pass up. "Perhaps, but the price is worth it to me. I need someone to watch my wares—otherwise I could be robbed blind—but I also

have to take my sisters home." It was all true; I just left out my other motivations.

"You're pretty," Twyla said loudly.

Elise blushed and smiled down at her. "Thank you. You girls are both lovely. What are your names?"

"I'm Twyla."

"I'm Didi." Didi turned side to side, her dress swishing back and forth as she was wont to do when she was nervous.

"It's nice to meet you both," Elise said before sinking into a curtsey and putting a graceful hand to her heart. I was starting to love watching the difference between Elise and her Starling persona. She was playing the Starling for the girls, always willing to entertain. Then she turned back to me. "Yes, I can watch your tent."

"Why can't *she* walk us home?" Twyla interrupted, having already fallen under Elise's spell. It would have been humorous if it weren't making the moment awkward.

"Well—"

"I don't know the way," Elise explained to Twyla. "And I don't think your mother would be happy to see you walking home with a stranger. Best go with your brother." She gave me a wink.

That wink made my gut tighten. It was like we shared a secret, she and I. And the idea of sharing secrets with this young woman was...appealing. I cleared my throat. "Thank you. Truly."

"It's nothing." She waved off my thanks and turned to the girls. "It was lovely to meet you, Miss Twyla. Miss Didi."

The girls each did a fair imitation of a curtsey, giggling as they did so. I sent Elise one more grateful look before tugging on the girls' hands and pointing us toward home.

Elise

I waved Maddox and his two sisters on their way, then ambled to the entrance of the Hatcher Hats and Costumes tent. I hoped that no one would come by while I was in charge. I could look out for thieves, no problem. But if a real customer came in with questions or a desire to purchase something, the best I could do was delay their leaving and hope that Maddox made it back in time to make the sale.

I smiled at the thought of Didi and Twyla's antics. It was clear Maddox loved them, and perhaps indulged them a bit too much, but their penchant for running away was problematic. Having Twyla request that I be the one to escort them home had left a little lump in my throat.

The fact that Maddox did not trust me to do that was not surprising. Any sane person would not hand over the care of children to a stranger. But it was odd that he would trust me with his livelihood. How did he know I wouldn't rifle around in his tent and steal anything of value? Of course, I'd have to be a fool to steal from him when he knew I was watching the place. And there were the five bits he'd promised me. I knew full well that an honestly earned five bits was worth more than a stolen copper—worth far more if it meant I didn't have to run and start over somewhere else.

I settled myself on the stool where Maddox usually worked, my hands grazing over the fabrics and threads strewn over its surface.

"Maddox!" a woman's voice called from outside a few minutes later. "Maddox!"

I had barely gotten to my feet when a woman entered, her eyes frantic and hair askew. She held a toddler perched on her hip, which was impressive since she was pregnant—not hugely so, but enough to be obvious.

Her eyes landed on me. "Who are you? Where's Maddox?" Her eyes darted about again.

"He's taken his younger sisters home."

Her shoulders sank in relief as she let out a sigh. Then she lowered her toddler to the ground before leaning one hand on the work table while the other rested against her belly.

I fidgeted, suddenly nervous about making a good impression. Clearly, this was Maddox's mother.

Or...was she? She was obviously Twyla and Didi's mother, but she seemed too young to be Maddox's mother. Yet Maddox had called the girls his sisters.

She took in a deep breath through her nose and opened her eyes, immediately looking at the ground to locate her child. The toddler had sat down right where he'd been set and seemed content to pick at the dirt and sparse grass under his chubby legs. Then she looked up at me. "And who might you be?" she asked.

"Elise, ma'am. I was close at hand when your girls came looking for Maddox. He asked me to keep an eye on the place while he returned them home." My brow scrunched. "I'm surprised you didn't cross paths."

She waved a hand through the air. "I was coming from the market. I'm certain the girls didn't bother telling him that they'd left me there. They were likely just happy for the attention."

I smiled at that. "They did seem quite taken with him."

She nodded. "You two are friends?" she asked.

I didn't quite know how to answer that. "Of a sort," I said, not wanting to give more weight to our relationship than there was, and also unsure that I wanted any friends right now. "He helped me with my costume. I've only just started singing on my own."

She smiled at that. "He does have a good eye for such things. Much like his father."

"And are you his..." I hesitated to say mother, wondering if it would insult her if she wasn't.

"No," she said, obviously knowing what I was thinking. "His mother passed on some ten years ago. I married his father six years ago."

Ah, so the girls were Maddox's half-sisters.

"I'm Dorothy, by the way. Dorothy Hatcher." She looked to the toddler on the ground, reaching down to pull a weed from his mouth. "And this is Mosley, but we call him Mouse."

"A pleasure, Mouse," I said with a silly curtsey. Mouse responded by grinning and holding up a fistful of dirt. I chuckled at the idea of this little one being called mouse after I'd told Maddox that he was a festival mouse.

"Well, I'd best get back to the house so that Maddox can return." She took one last deep breath and let it out. "Thank you for looking after things here," she said as she placed a hand on my forearm. The gesture startled me in its sincerity.

"You're welcome."

"Come along, Mouse." She stooped down and heaved the boy into her arms, where he squealed and kicked his legs. "It was lovely to meet you, Elise," she called over the toddler's protests.

"And you."

As she walked away, I realized just how much I meant it. She'd been kind, and everything about her was a testament to Maddox's goodness and the strength of his family. I envied that. I did. But not in a jealous way, just

in the way of deep, desperate wanting. The past week had been cold and hard. It felt like walking down a path lined with doors, all promising either joy or misery, but I never knew which it would be. Should I run farther? Stay here? Seek work in a shop? Keep singing and following the festival crowd? Door after door of possibilities with no guarantee of success. I still had some of the money I'd taken from my brothers, but it wasn't much. The gold brooch was securely latched to the inside of my petticoat, where I hoped it would stay for a long time. If the day ever came where I had to sell it, my future would be bleak indeed.

I was anxious for Maddox's return and the promised five bits.

While he was gone, many festival goers wandered in to look around, but only two seemed truly interested and they promised to come back in a while. I hoped they would.

When I saw Maddox returning, I stood, anxious for payment and to get back to my singing.

Maddox smiled at me. "I hear you met Dorothy."

"Yes, I was happy to let her know that the girls were safely with you."

"It's a shame I didn't just stay here and wait for her. I could have saved you the inconvenience."

I shook my head. "It was fine."

"Didi was quite taken with you," he announced. "I think she was begging her mother to let you live with us when I left."

It was a sweet compliment. It should have left me pleased. Instead I just felt a keen sense of loss. What would it be like to live among such people? I hadn't yet met Maddox's father, and perhaps there were other family members, but the ease and joy I had seen from those little girls said enough. I forced a smile through my sadness. "They're sweet girls." I took a step back. "I should get back to my spot." I nodded toward the patch of shade where I'd been singing before, but waited for a moment, expecting him to give me the five bits he had promised.

"Of course," he said without reaching into his pocket. "Thank you again."

Perhaps I should have asked for the bits, but my bravery failed me. I could carry a purse around and beg coins from onlookers when I was playing the fair damsel in my brothers' stories, but begging from Maddox—a man I barely knew but already respected and whom I wanted to think well of me...

I couldn't do it.

I swallowed my disappointment and turned away. In my mind, I had already spent those coins on food for tomorrow. I had planned to allow myself a meal that actually filled my belly instead of just enough to stop the hunger pains. I could pull a few coins from the pockets of the patrons that were still here—no. No. I stopped that thought and reminded myself that I would *not* become my brothers. I would find a better way. So I was hungry. So what? I sucked in a breath and told myself that I would be fine. I was no worse off than I'd been this morning.

Maddox

The day ended and I went through the routine of closing up shop. I pulled everything inside the tent and pulled down the two sides that had been open for the day, securing the flaps before wandering over to a fire that some of the other vendors had lit. They welcomed me with head nods and easy smiles, which was a far cry from the suspicion I'd received the first few times I'd joined them two years ago. They had been accustomed to my father's presence. He'd been the one to stay overnight with the stall, protecting our livelihood, while I took care of things at home. But once Mosley was born, Dorothy had asked my father to find a way to be home with her in the evenings, and I'd been happy to step into the solitude of festival nights, sleeping behind the tent, under the stars.

The sun was fully set, but there were still some festival goers enjoying the fire dancers and night magicians. I tended to avoid those. Night magicians worked at night because it was easier to steal in the dark. Being around the peddlers and performers full-time had taken some getting used to. They had a different code that I still didn't quite understand but that I had to respect.

As I stared into the fire, allowing myself to relax, I caught the sounds of one of the songstresses. Odd. The singers didn't usually stay out past sunset. Some men tended to take that as an invitation. I shook my head. Hopefully whoever it was knew what they were doing.

Now that my ear was tuned to it, the words and tone became more and more clear. A bit of panic rose up when I recognized the Starling's song.

I was on my feet before I'd decided to act, my long stride following the beacon of her voice. I found her easily. She stood in the middle of a clearing where the fire dancers often performed. Seeing her surrounded by so many people, some of them still holding tankards that were clearly not their first, made me nervous. I didn't like the hungry look in some of the men's eyes. I studied the crowd, trying to discern if there were any true threats. It was a relief to see Ludly crouched near the front of the crowd, his fire sticks in hand. Several other members of the Starfire troupe were there as well. They seemed intrigued by her performance, and I could see two of the female fire dancers whispering to one another while pointing to Elise. That made me nervous in a different way. For the most part, the different acts got along well enough and steered clear of each other. But once in a while, cool competition turned to hot rivalry, and if taken too far, things could become dangerous.

I focused back on Elise, and as I studied her movements, I saw that she was more nervous than I'd realized. There was a stiffness to her stance and an awkwardness in her gestures, like she still had to think hard in order to put the performance together.

She was lucky that her voice was so enchanting; otherwise, people wouldn't have been so content to listen. Though the fact that she was a songstress singing in the dark was no doubt part of the intrigue.

I edged closer to her.

As the song drew to a close, the energy from the crowd seemed to loosen her nerves, allowing her to lean into the climactic crescendo and end with confidence.

The crowd applauded with enthusiasm, and several people stepped forward to drop coins into the nest at her feet while she curtseyed.

As her audience dispersed, I noticed several who lingered, but Ludly made it to her first. He spoke with energy and was soon joined by the two women I'd seen whispering earlier. Fortunately, both women looked excited and jumped into the conversation with Elise and Ludly, making me wonder what that was about. Elise smiled and nodded but seemed less excited than the fire dancers. I drew even closer, hoping to hear the conversation, and noticed that Jacobi was lingering nearby, his eyes fixed on Elise.

When Ludly and his fellow dancers turned to go, I hurried my steps, arriving at her side before Jacobi was able to steal her attention. "That was magnificent," I said, boldly taking her hand and wrapping it over my arm so that I could escort her away.

Her hand was tense on my arm. She looked surprised and a little nervous but allowed me to tug her away from the crowd. I glanced up to see Jacobi's

lip curl before he walked away.

"I didn't expect to be escorted away like a queen." The words were meant to be teasing, but I could hear her uncertainty.

"Sorry if I'm being overbearing," I said as we came to a stop. "The night crowd is different than the day crowd."

She sucked in a breath. "I gathered that as I was singing."

"You don't usually perform after dark?" I asked, hoping she'd tell me why she was doing so now without my having to pry.

She looked away, busying herself with removing and folding her cape. "I was watching the fire dancers perform, and when they were finished, the crowd was yelling for more. They wanted more entertainment, and I couldn't pass up the opportunity to make a little extra."

The moment she said it, I wanted to smack my forehead against a tree. "Saints, Elise, I'm sorry. I completely forgot to pay you what I promised for watching the tent. I can get it for you right now if you'd like."

She shook her head. "You really don't have to, it wasn't a problem."

The fact that she was here working in the dark suggested otherwise. "I do have to. We had an agreement and I'll honor it. Can you walk back with me now before going..." Going where? Where would she go tonight? Where had she slept last night? She didn't have a stall or a wagon. She certainly didn't have a home here.

"I'll walk with you," she answered. "I need to head in that direction anyway."

The only thing in that direction other than tents and wagons was woods, and the idea of her wandering in the dark woods to find someplace safe to bed down, especially when it would be easy for someone to follow her...

I knew it wasn't my place to protect her, but my gut instincts didn't seem to care what my place was. "Shall we?" I asked, tipping my head in the direction of my tent. She fell into step beside me but didn't speak. So I had to ask, "Do you expect you'll continue to perform at night?"

I could see her chewing her lip in the faint light. "I don't know. The man who leads the fire dance troupe—" She looked up at me, as if questioning if I knew who she spoke of.

"Ludly."

"Yes. Ludly said that he'd love to incorporate my singing with their fire dancing. Especially if there was a song about a dragon or some such."

My eyebrows rose. "It's a clever idea."

"I do think that the combination of my song and the fire dancers' artistry could be quite brilliant, and could be lucrative. But as you said, the night crowd..."

I wanted to jump in with my observations, but I held back, hoping she would keep talking.

She finally let out a sigh. "It's just different."

"Did the crowd make you nervous?"

She tipped her head back and forth, considering. "A little...and honestly, the fire-breather..."

I was grateful she was observant enough to notice. "Jacobi is one to watch out for."

"He is?"

I nodded. "He is quick to fight, and quick to take what he wants. He works with Ludly and the Starfire troupe some of the time, but he doesn't really play well with others."

She looked ahead but nodded, seeming to take my observations seriously. Thank the stars for that.

We arrived at my tent, and I was glad to see that it appeared undisturbed after I'd left it unattended. I dropped Elise's arm and slipped inside, finding my way by memory to the corner where a small wooden trunk sat. The top was filled with scarves, but I reached past them, lifting the false bottom to pull out a handful of coins. Then I closed it up and headed for the doorway.

"How can you find your way in the dark?"

I stopped, startled to hear Elise's voice so close at hand. She had followed me in, and it sounded like she was just by the opening of the canvas flap. "Practice," I answered as I neared the spot where I thought she was.

"Oh..." She moved a little, and I was finally able to see which dark shadow was her.

We stood there in the dark, unable to see each other, but neither of us moved to leave the confines of the tent either.

For a moment I had the foolish thought that perhaps she wanted to stay here close to me. Maybe she'd consider sleeping here in the tent while I slept out back.

"I can't find where it opens, can you?" she whispered.

I winced, berating myself. She'd been waiting for me to guide her out. "Yes." I reached for the opening and pulled the canvas aside. "Go ahead."

The fresh air outside cleared my head. "Here." I dropped the handful of coins in her palm, then turned back to secure the canvas.

"This is far too much!" she protested.

"Is it? I didn't bother counting in the dark."

"Here, take these back."

I shook my head. "Consider it retribution for me forgetting to pay you earlier. You wouldn't have had to take on the darker crowd if I hadn't been a dunce."

She continued to hold out the excess money, her face only dimly lit by the nearby fire. "I ended up making quite a bit from that performance. I should be thanking you."

"Where are you going to sleep tonight?" I asked, mostly out of curiosity, but also because I wanted her to forget about giving the coins back.

She took a step back, her face closing off. "The same place I slept last night."

Frustration stiffened my shoulders. If I kept pressing the matter, she might mistake my motives. "Maybe my sisters had the right idea," I suggested after mustering my bravery. "Maybe you should stay with them."

Elise laughed at the idea. "Yes, I'm certain what your stepmother needs is to have one more person to take care of. She seems to have her hands full enough already."

I shrugged, not wishing to press the idea, but not willing to brush it aside as she had. "It could be a benefit to all of us. I doubt Dorothy would have to take care of you."

The laughter left her eyes, replaced by longing. "It's a nice idea that they had" was all she said.

I let the conversation drop. If I was actually going to truly consider such a notion, I would have to speak to my father and Dorothy before inviting a stranger into our home. "Just...be careful."

"I'm fine." She turned and walked away, leaving me worried about all sorts of things. Her safety. Her opinion of me. Her plans to work with the Starfire troupe.

Why did I care? I barely knew her, and when I took a step back and looked at things objectively, my feelings didn't make sense.

But they were there.

Elise

I walked away from Maddox, feeling as if my luck had changed. Not only had he given me nearly double the payment he had promised, but the money from my performance would add to my stash as well. I hadn't counted it yet, but the weight of my purse lifted my spirits.

A sigh escaped me as I thought about the way Maddox had led me away from the night crowd. It had been almost...gallant. He was a handsome young man. I hadn't noticed when I'd first met him since I'd been preoccupied with the urgent matter of figuring out how to provide for and feed myself, but now that my prospects weren't entirely bleak...well...I noticed.

Of course, all that hope and good feeling was tamped down as I navigated my way into the woods—far enough away to be alone, but not so far that animals would be roaming close by. I'd spent yesterday evening making a small shelter. I'd found a large tree whose trunk split in two at the height of my waist. I'd gathered long branches, setting one end in the juncture of that split and the other ends on the ground. Then I'd covered my little lean-to with evergreen boughs. It gave me some semblance of peace not to be out in the open, but my solitude was still nerve-wracking.

I hated night time. The quiet night used to be a favorite of mine. It was the time when my brothers left me alone and no one demanded anything of me.

But now...I was so very alone. So the relief I'd felt when lying in the quiet of our peddler wagon was now replaced by fear and uncertainty. I didn't know where I'd live come winter. I didn't know if my singing act would remain interesting or if people would tire of it. I didn't know if I could protect myself.

Peddlers would continue to travel and peddle their wares just as I had with my brothers. Those who wished to camp would travel down out of the mountains and settle near the shore. I would either need to find someone I could travel with, or I would need to procure at least a cart and pony. But did I really have any hope of making that much money in the next month? I doubted it. But perhaps if the Starfire troupe really did want to work with me...could I trust them enough to travel with them? So much uncertainty and fear made my head spin and my stomach clench.

I tried comforting myself with the story of the mother wolf. I imagined her finding me, gathering all the pieces of myself that had been torn from me. I imagined her singing me soothing songs as she healed my wounds.

But then the image of the wolf mother morphed into that of my own mother, and the pain of missing her seeped in, coating me in melancholy and leaving me aching for love. So I hummed the tune of a lullaby she used to sing, trying to soothe myself to sleep. I thought about the Hatcher sisters' idea that I live with them, letting my mind conjure images of sleeping in a warm house surrounded by warm people, and only then was I able to fall asleep.

I woke as soon as the rising sunlight hit my face. I sat up and my stomach grumbled. Looking through my bag, I found that all I had left of the food I'd stolen from the wolf wagon was one strip of dried meat and a few handfuls of nuts. As much as I wanted to save all my resources, I knew that standing and singing for a good portion of the day would take too much energy to do on a stomach that hadn't been properly filled in ten days. So I ate the last strip of dried meat and a handful of nuts, relishing each bite and feeling the strength return as I sipped on my water afterwards. Maddox had given me nine bits last night, nearly the worth of a whole copper. I would use some of that to stock up on food and maybe even buy a noonday meal so long as I was able to collect at least a few coins this morning.

I put everything into my pack except for my Starling cape, which I draped over one arm, then I made my way through the woods, keeping an eye out for anyone else, and made it to the festival grounds without difficulty.

I was tempted to take up the same spot as I'd occupied yesterday so that I could remain close to the one person who had befriended me. But I knew that variety was key, so I found a spot between the archery course and the mead sellers instead, hoping that the drink would loosen some purse strings.

There I set out the little money pouch that I'd fashioned to look like a nest for people to drop their coins in.

It was near noon when I recognized Dorothy in the crowd with her three young children. She smiled when she caught my eye, and they all sat down on the ground to listen to me for several songs. Didi sat cross-legged with her chin in her hands and a smile on her face while Twyla twirled and danced nearby. But once Mouse started loudly screeching and constantly trying to flee his mother's lap, Dorothy gathered the girls and led them away. Didi stumbled along, holding on to her mother's hand but keeping her head turned over her shoulder so that she could continue watching me.

I waved and winked.

When the lunch hour arrived, I looked in my little coin nest and decided that I could wait until this evening to eat. When I'd left my brothers, I hadn't anticipated just how much worry and uncertainty would accompany me. Even though I knew I had coins to spare, I also knew that while I could spare them *now*, I didn't know if I could spare them *later*. When winter set in and the festivals stopped and there was no one around to hear my singing and throw me their coins, I would miss any money that I squandered during these temperate days. Even if I ended up camping near the shore with some of the others, I had no idea how many people would care to hear a young girl singing.

On Friday, I noticed Maddox in the small crowd that had gathered to hear me sing. He seemed to be waiting for me, so when I'd finished, I beckoned him over, anxious for a friendly person to talk to.

He gave me an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be a nuisance. But my father is working with me today, and he's heard so much chatter about you from my sisters that he'd like to meet you."

His words took a moment to make sense in my mind. I shook my head with a smile. "I'm not certain what I did to earn your sisters' admiration, but I know I don't deserve it." I looked around, realizing I'd lost nearly all of my audience during the last song. "I need to find a different spot, so I could come now if you really think he wants to meet me."

Maddox just smiled and nodded in the direction of their tent.

As we walked, I replaced my feathered cape with my cloak. It was just cool enough today to need it, and I worried that the fall weather was going to come on before I was ready.

"Have you come this far north before?" he asked as we walked.

"No. My family always traveled the southern route so that we wouldn't have to worry about the weather. Tethurn, Caldo, Norsing." Those villages all resided south of the mountain range that ran through the northern half of Winberg and were much warmer. Coming north was necessary to avoid my brothers, but as fall deepened, I had to wonder if I had any chance of being safe without more bedding, a tent... I swallowed the panic that started to brew in my stomach at that thought. I fully intended to travel with the others at the end of the week as they continued on to the next festival in Stormbrook, and if I made good money there, I might be able to purchase enough gear, but would I be able to carry it all on my back as I walked to my next destination?

Maddox

It was interesting watching her transform from the Starling back to just Elise. She wore confidence when performing just as easily as she wore her costume. But the nearer we came to our tent, the less sure she looked, and I wondered if it was the talk of approaching winter that made her nervous.

It should.

"I know it's a trade-off." I tried to say it conversationally, like it wasn't a warning. "There are more festivals up north, and the villages aren't as spread out as they are once you get south of Murrwood, but the mountains make the travel harder and the winter longer."

She nodded, looking too stoic for my comfort. "I'm starting to understand that, I think."

What I wanted to say was, "Do you really?" Instead, I just walked into our tent. "Dad?" I called as we pushed our way past costume displays and into his work area, where he sat with spectacles perched on his nose and a pot of tea at his elbow.

"Ah," he said, climbing to his feet. "The famous songbird." His barrel-chested voice filled the space with its deep tones. He reached out a hand, swallowing her small one with his. "A pleasure, my dear. I'm Marshall Hatcher."

"Elise," she responded.

My brow jumped up, curious why she would omit a last name when my father had given his. And—I realized in that moment—she hadn't given me her last name either. Was Elise keeping secrets?

"It's a pleasure to meet the Starling at last," he said with a smile. "It's a lovely stage name. How did you come up with it?"

Elise's eyes cut over to me and I looked away, embarrassed that she might think my father was trying to get her to give me credit or brag about me. But I simply hadn't mentioned to my family that I had helped Elise with her songstress name.

"Actually, the Starling was Maddox's idea," she said easily.

"Was it?" he asked. "Well, he does have an eye for character, doesn't he?"

I closed my eyes and groaned. "Please don't," I muttered.

He held up his hands. "My apologies. Heaven forbid I do something as embarrassing as being proud of my own son."

"Dad—"

"He does have a talent for it," Elise said quietly, snagging both of our attention. "That much is obvious." She looked at each of us in turn, seeming unsure that her answer was welcome, before smiling tentatively.

My father looked over at me with triumph. "See? She knows what she's talking about."

Saints, this was just getting more embarrassing. "I really hope you didn't wish to meet Elise just to brag about me," I said, giving my father a sharp stare.

"Of course not," he said, turning his attention back to Elise. "I wanted to extend an invitation. Dorothy and the girls would love to have you over for dinner this evening. Will you come?"

Her face was pure surprise. "Oh. Well," she said, looking like a startled deer.

"Dorothy planned to extend the invitation herself a few days ago, but she didn't wish to interrupt your performance."

Elise looked mortified. "I'm so sorry. If I'd known she wanted to speak with me, I would have happily stopped and—"

My father waved her off. "Oh, don't feel badly over it. It was no one's fault, but we decided it would be easier for Maddox or I to extend the invitation since we're here nearly every day. You will come, won't you?"

I winced a bit at the demanding invitation. What if she truly did not want to come? I didn't want to impose on her even though I desperately wanted her to accept. This girl needed help. She may not realize she needed it, but

she did. And if she didn't get it from us, I wondered who would take advantage of such a young, innocent—and yes, beautiful—performer.

Elise cut her nervous eyes over to me, and I gave a gentle smile that I hoped would put her at ease. She took a deep breath and then shook herself, putting on a smile like she'd slipped on a hat. "Of course, that's very kind of you."

"Wonderful," my father said, clapping his hands together. "If you'll just meet me back here when the sun touches the horizon, we can walk to the house. Dorothy will be thrilled."

Her smile wobbled, but she nodded. "I look forward to it," she said, but I was fairly sure she didn't mean it. "I'll return then." She started backing away. "Thank you again."

She practically ran out of the tent.

"Oh dear," my father sighed. "Was I too pushy?"

"I'll talk to her," I said and ran after her before I had a chance to really think it through.

I dodged around a few people. "Elise," I called.

She stopped her hurried retreat and turned to wait for me.

I stopped in front of her. "Are you sure you want to come? I don't want my family to overwhelm you."

"It's fine," she said with a forced smile. "I'm happy not to have to make my own meal for a night. And you'll be there, and I know you, so..." She trailed off and I couldn't figure out what she'd been going to say. Was she implying that I put her at ease? I certainly hoped so.

"Actually," I was sad to say, "I won't be there for dinner."

She blinked in surprise. "You're not coming?"

I shook my head. "I have to stay with the merchandise. Someone will bring me a meal later on." Hopefully that wouldn't deter her. The way she spoke of food, I wondered if this might be the first full meal she'd had in some time.

"Well," she said and I held my breath. "I suppose I'll just have to make do with Twyla and Didi."

I smiled and sighed in relief. "They'll be excellent hostesses, I'm sure." She chuckled a little. "I've no doubt," she said, and then waved and went

her way.

I sighed, grateful that she would be there, that Dorothy would get a chance to mother her and feed her. Something told me that was the very

least we could do for her, as she likely needed so much more.

Elise

I returned to the Hatcher Hats and Costumes tent as the sun dipped low in the sky. Though I was nervous at the prospect of being a guest in Maddox's home, that feeling was overshadowed by the prospect of food. Real food. Possibly abundant food. I'd been preoccupied by the thought all afternoon. Would they have bread? Maybe even warm biscuits? Would they serve any meat? Or just a vegetable broth? I tortured myself with the possibilities right up until I saw Maddox and Marshall outside the opening of their tent, waiting for me.

I rushed the last few strides. "I'm sorry I'm late," I apologized.

"You're not late at all. I was just giving Maddox a few last-minute instructions."

Maddox rolled his eyes. "I think I know what I'm doing by now."

"Fine, fine," Marshall conceded, then turned to me. "Are you ready for a good dinner?" he asked in what seemed to be his usual jovial manner.

"I—" My stomach interrupted me with a loud gurgle. I looked away, my face flaming in embarrassment. All the tantalizing options I'd conjured in my mind of what food might be given me this evening was making my empty stomach churn.

Marshall didn't laugh, thankfully. He just said, "I'll take that as a yes," and then started walking. "Come along. The house is this way."

I looked over at Maddox, fully expecting him to be grinning, or even laughing at me. Instead, his smile was soft, and his eyes were concerned. It was such a different reaction than I'd been expecting that I blinked for a moment. His kindness created a warm, soft spot inside my chest. There were just so many things to like about Maddox.

"Go on," he said quietly, tilting his head toward his father's retreating back. "Tell the girls hello for me."

I nodded as my face cooled and I turned to follow Marshall through the festival and toward the village proper.

The Hatcher home was not completely opposite the village from the festival grounds, but it was a fair walk. Marshall whistled a tune most of the way, his steps quick and jaunty, seeming entirely at ease without us conversing at all.

How grateful I was for that fact. I didn't know that I could have handled an inquiry into my life or my plans for the future—or my family. So once I'd stopped worrying that he was going to pepper me with questions, I was able to enjoy the walk. We found the stream that ran around the edge of the village and followed it, breaking away from it to approach their house from behind, where it sat at the very outskirts of the village.

Marshall opened the door and waved me inside. "Here we are," he said.

I stepped inside, recognizing right away that my daydreams of what their house would be like were not far off.

It was a warm house, and it smelled spectacular. The scents of bread and meat and vegetables filled the air. I wanted to faint with rapture.

"Dorothy," Marshall called, "I've brought our guest."

"Is she here?" a little shout came from another room, accompanied by clambering and scraping chairs. Then Twyla and Didi came racing through a doorway, big smiles on their faces.

Twyla came to a stop just in front of me, her smile still in place.

Didi stopped a few steps away, her face scrunching in consternation.

"You're not the Starling right now," she said as though it was a great affront to see me out of costume. I smothered a grin.

Dorothy followed after them, rolling her eyes even while her lips turned up. "No, she's not. She's a real person, and when we meet people, what do we do?" she prompted.

Both girls sank into a curtsey, saying, "How do you do?" almost in unison.

Didi took a step forward and held out her hand. "Now we shake hands."

"Oh, of course." I curtsied, said, "How do you do," and then took the hand she still held out.

"Where's your pretty cape?" Twyla asked.

"It's in my satchel." Along with everything else that I owned.

"Run along and finish setting the table, girls." They were quick to race off and do Dorothy's bidding, so she turned back to me. "It's lovely to see you again, Miss Elise."

"Please, I'm not a Miss anything. Just Elise is all I am."

"As you like," Dorothy said, handing little Mouse off to Marshall when he reached for the boy. "I'll see if I can get Kat to come down. She's about your age, I'd say. How old are you, dear?"

"Fourteen."

Her brow jumped up. "Only fourteen, and a voice like that? You're a lucky one, aren't you?"

"Yes, I suppose," I admitted, my face heating at the genuine praise.

"No supposing about it. You'll do well with your singing, I have no doubt." She turned to look up into the loft that was above half of the main room. "Katharine!" she called, then turned back to me. "She's a year older than you, though half the time she doesn't act it."

A girl with dark hair and eyes appeared at the edge of the loft, a bundle of fabric in her arms. "What?"

"Our guest is here," Dorothy said, gesturing to me.

Katharine's eyes found mine and she grinned. "Oh! Sorry." She hurried out of sight and then appeared again at the top of a narrow set of stairs that sat along one wall, her arms now empty. "I was working on Mistress Raven's skirt."

Dorothy smiled and said quietly to me, "She gets so involved in her sewing that she can ignore nearly anything."

Katharine scrambled down the stairs and right up to me, her face bright and open. "You're the Starling?"

I laughed a little, but before I could answer, Didi piped in.

"She is! But not right now. Right now she's just a person, and you're supposed to say, 'How do you do.'"

Kat just smiled at her little sister's reprimand and did as instructed. "How do you do," she said, holding out a hand. "I'm Katharine, but everyone calls me Kat."

I took her hand and we both dropped a curtsey in greeting. "It's nice to meet you, Kat. I'm Elise."

She dropped my hand but then wrapped her arm around mine and led me to the table. "I'm going to have to come hear you sing tomorrow. The girls said you were wonderful, but when Dorothy told me that you really *were* wonderful and that you were probably only a little older than me, I knew I'd have to come see you."

"I'm only fourteen," I corrected.

She stopped her rushed dialogue to look at me a moment. "Are you? You seem older than that."

I shrugged.

"No matter," she said, pointing me to a chair and then taking the one next to me. "It's all just days and weeks anyway."

The rest of the family took their chairs, making me realize that I was probably sitting in Maddox's spot. It struck me how lucky I was to have met him that first day, especially as I was about to consume the best meal I'd had in recent memory and it was all because of him.

As we began to eat, the family talked amongst themselves, leaving me free to take bite after bite. The soup felt wonderful sliding down my throat, and the texture of the biscuits was flaky, and yes, still warm! When was the last time I'd eaten a biscuit that wasn't cold and hard? It must have been when my mother was still alive.

I finished my bowl of soup so quickly that I was embarrassed, but Dorothy just refilled my bowl without interrupting the conversation. After looking around to be sure that no one was noticing my ill-mannered inhalation of the meal, I dipped my spoon in, feeling only grateful. I'd eaten half of my second helping and was slowing down before anyone asked me a question.

Kat turned to me. "Do you and your family follow the same festival route as Father and Maddox?" she asked, her eyes wide and curious.

I chewed for a moment before answering, giving myself a chance to decide on a response. "I hope to start following that route, yes, but I don't have any family. I…lost them recently."

A spoon clattered, and I looked up to see Katharine staring at me, looking aghast. "You're on your own?"

I nodded, mustering a smile to reassure her.

"You're too pretty to be on your own," she declared.

That made me sit up straighter. "I beg your pardon?"

"Dorothy, don't you agree?" she said, trying to enlist her stepmother's help.

"I—" was all Dorothy got out before Katharine fixed her attention back on me.

"I'm the first to admit there are a lot of good people, but there are also plenty of bad people." The seriousness of her voice contradicted the youth of her face. "Aren't you worried someone will take advantage of you?"

"Well, yes"—that worry was deeply ingrained and well founded—"of course, but—"

"We can't just let her wander about on her own," she said to her family, then turned back to me again. "Where do you sleep?"

I was so caught off guard by the blunt question that I found myself answering. "In the woods."

"The woods?" She looked horrified. "By yourself? Out in the open?" She heaved a perturbed sigh. "Dad, we can't—"

"Shh," Marshall said as he rubbed Katharine's back. "Take a breath and let Dorothy speak, Kat."

Kat took a deliberate breath, looked to the ceiling and then let it out before turning her attention to Dorothy.

Dorothy smiled. "Thank you, dear," she said to her husband. "And I share your concerns, Kat." She turned to me and I felt somewhat uncomfortable at all the attention I was receiving, and at the fact that at least Dorothy and Marshall seemed to have something planned that involved me. I itched at the thought. I didn't like people making plans for me.

"The truth is, Elise, ever since I met you, I haven't been able to get your situation off my mind," Dorothy said, her face worried and earnest. "It's not often we run across a festival performer who is entirely on their own. Especially one so young as you."

I stiffened my back. "I can take care of myself. I'm already earning money."

"And I'm certain you'd scrape by on your own if you needed to. But..."
She hesitated. "Perhaps you don't need to."

I set my napkin down. "I appreciate your concern," I said, climbing to my feet. "But I assure you, I don't need—"

"No, don't leave!" Didi said as she slipped off her chair and then threw her arms around my legs. "Mama said you were going to stay and play with us! I want you to play with us!"

I stopped and turned my confusion back to Dorothy.

Her eyes were on her daughter. "What I said, Didi, was that she *might* be able to play with you, but it would be up to her." Then she turned her gaze to mine. "You see, I have my hands full, and with the baby coming this winter, and Mouse still eating everything in sight, the girls would love someone to keep them company. Kat is busy sewing for the shop, and Maddox and Marshall are busy as well. So I thought I'd offer a trade."

"A trade?" I asked, all wariness.

"Yes. One service for another. If you were willing to entertain my girls and keep them out of trouble, as well as help out around the house, then we could give you a place to stay during the down months." Her voice shook

and I suddenly felt all her worry for me. Her genuine worry. "You really cannot continue to sleep in the woods for much longer, Elise. You'll freeze. Please."

I didn't understand this. It didn't make sense that this family would open their home to me simply because they saw me struggling. Yes, their little girls seemed to like my costume and my singing, but...

"Oh good!" Kat suddenly exclaimed in relief. "That will work very well. Really, Elise, you should say yes right away."

"Kat, don't push," Marshall said. "She's only just met us and she deserves time to think it over." He turned his eyes to Didi. "Come here, Didi. Let Miss Elise finish eating."

Didi reluctantly let go, and as she passed by her father to get to her seat, she whispered loudly, "But I wanted to play with her."

"I know, sweetheart. Let her think it over."

I retook my seat, grateful for his words, but I still felt Kat's eyes on me, waiting for me to make a decision as we continued our meal. By the time I'd finished, I was so uncomfortable that I was determined to leave. These people were lovely. They'd been nothing but kind, but such treatment was so foreign that it felt feigned or contrived or like they were trying to manipulate me. And though I didn't want to believe that about them, I also needed to watch out for myself, because no one else was going to do it for me.

So when Dorothy started to bundle up some food for Maddox, I jumped to my feet. "I'll take it to him," I blurted.

"Oh, there's no need. Please stay and visit," Dorothy said. "We'd love—"

"Please. I really would like to take it to him, and I need to go." My body vibrated with the need to be out of there. The house, which had been warm and welcoming before, suddenly felt dangerous and stifling.

"But—"

Marshall put a hand to Dorothy's arm from where he sat in his chair. He seemed to have a steady, calming influence on both his wife and his oldest daughter. "Let her go, dear."

Dorothy looked down at him and then back at me, concern still tensing her face. "Very well," she finally conceded. She finished wrapping the food, and the moment it was in my hands, I said my goodbyes and escaped out the door, practically running toward the stream that would lead out of town and to the large clearing where the festival was held. A couple of people called to me from their fires as I passed by. I wished that recognition could have made me feel like part of the community, but it just made me nervous. I hadn't realized how difficult it would be to hide while being a performer. I tried to reassure myself by remembering the mountain passes I'd traversed to get here. The humongous wagon that made the Wolfe siblings' act so spectacular could not make it over those mountains without significant difficulty.

As I approached the Hatchers' tent, I didn't see Maddox at the fire with the other festival rats, so I walked around his tent and found him sitting at his own small fire.

Maddox

As I stared into the flames, I berated myself for the hundredth time this evening. Who was I to intrude on Elise's life? She'd already rejected the idea of staying with us when I'd mentioned it in passing, but as these few days had passed and the weather cooled, my concern had multiplied. Elise was too skinny. She was too young and unfamiliar with this town and these people. She didn't know yet who to trust and who to steer clear of, and no matter how many times I told myself that she wasn't my business, the protectiveness I felt would not go away.

Movement at the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I was surprised to see Elise herself walking toward me. "You're back sooner than I expected," I commented, keeping my seat even though I wished to jump up and greet her. My hope had been that she would stay with my family for a long time and get comfortable with them, maybe even confide in them.

"I offered to bring this to you." She held out a bundle, which no doubt held food.

I took it and she turned to go.

"Elise," I called. Perhaps we were not friends, but she had always been friendly.

"What?" she asked without turning around.

"Is everything all right? Did my family do something to—"

She spun to face me. "They invited me to *live* with them," she said, her incredulity on full display. "Who does that? Who looks at a girl they don't know—a festival rat—and invites her into their home?"

I shrugged, unable to explain what had convinced us all that Elise needed help—our help.

"It seems like a terrible lapse in judgment on their part," she pointed out, her eyes narrowed and suspicious. "Don't they worry about your sisters? Aren't they afraid I'll steal from them? I'm desperate, poor, and have nothing to lose."

"You need a place to go," I said, knowing it did nothing to answer all the questions she'd just brought up.

Her shoulders pulled back and she looked down at me. "I'm fine on my own."

Saints, she was pretty, with her stubborn chin sticking out and the way the fire made her eyes spark. But stubbornness only got a person so far. "With no home? No shelter?" I challenged. "You just said yourself that you are desperate. Winter is coming, Elise. This valley is high enough that we'll be snowed in for three months." Did she know that? Did she realize how precarious her situation was? "And during those three months, where will you be?"

Her lips pressed together and the muscles in her forehead twitched as she thought. "I'll go with the others. I'll get out of the mountains and stay near the shore," she threw out, but it felt like something someone says when they want to have an answer but they don't.

I shook my head, trying to be gentle but needing her to understand. "Even if you were to get out of the mountains, the cold nights and the wild animals make living without shelter extremely dangerous, especially if you're on your own," I pointed out. "Once the festivals are done, you won't have a source of income. We just want you to have options."

She chewed on her lip as her eyes darted about, no doubt searching for a way to provide for herself. Finally, she gave a frustrated shake of her head and said, "I'll think about it."

It was a start. "And you should," I encouraged. "I know you don't know us, and you have every right to be worried. But I'm scared for you if you try to go alone."

A wave of fear splashed over her face for just a moment, then it was gone, replaced by stubbornness and tenacity.

She looked toward the dark woods, though what she looked for there in the darkness, I couldn't guess. Finally she turned back to me. "Your family was very kind."

I nodded.

"Good night, Maddox."

"Good night."

As she walked away, I resisted the urge to go after her, to ensure she found a place to sleep that was safe from the elements, animals, and humans alike. But her continued resistance made it clear that pestering her and insisting I was right was not going to win her over. She had to come to that decision on her own.

I just hoped she did it soon.

Elise

Maddox had said he was scared for me, but why? Were we friends? What made a young man that I just met care enough about me to convince his family to offer me a home? People didn't do that. They weren't that good. Maybe it wasn't his idea. Maybe Didi and Twyla really had convinced their parents to find them a playmate in the form of a lonely performer.

Sleep did not come easily. The night sounds seemed more sinister and the air colder than they had before. Of course, it likely *was* colder, but I was certain that my imaginings didn't help either. I couldn't help thinking about what it would be like to live in a house. One without wheels. One with space to move about and a fire inside. What would it be like to have reliable meals? And kind people?

That thought was almost too much to contemplate. And as the daydreams kept coming, they started to include what it might be like to be in such close proximity to Maddox. Maddox was kind and handsome. He was the sort of boy I hoped one day would take an interest in me. And if I were to spend time with them, maybe someday he would see me as more than just a waif in need of rescuing.

I slapped my hands over my eyes and shook my head, letting out a groan. I could not afford to be ridiculous right now! And imagining romantic scenarios where the kindest boy I'd ever met suddenly fell in love with me was the most ridiculous thing I could conceive of. I could not allow such fanciful thoughts to influence my decision. But what about his family and the kindness they offered? Was I kidding myself to think it was real? Imagining the impossible? When I'd spent the past three years being unwanted, could I really expect a family of strangers to take me in and treat me better than my own brothers had?

I'd spent enough time around mystics and magicians to know that if a thing seemed too good to be true, it probably was.

I wouldn't reject their offer, not yet, but I would keep trying to solve my own conundrum.

To that end, I stayed away from the Hatcher Hats and Costumes tent on Saturday, determined to focus on supporting myself and being sure that whatever decision I made was truly *mine*.

Ludly found me, and once I'd finished a song, he approached and launched into his ideas.

"I really think we should do it. Having real fire added to your songs, and having a whole storyline added to our act, people will love it," he effused.

"But the night crowd..."

"I know. They're bold. That's why we keep together as a troupe. So long as my girls stay close to the boys in our troupe, no one ever gives them trouble. We could try it tonight at least."

- "And then what?" I asked.
- "What do you mean?"
- "Where are you going next?"
- "Faehurst."
- "Not Stormbrook?"

He shook his head. "From here, all the rats have to make a choice. Head east through the valley, which hits Stormbrook and Lorta. Or go north, around the great mountain to Faehurst and Winhaven. The festivals at Stormbrook and Lorta take place during the same two weeks as those in Faehurst and Winhaven. Most of the performers switch off, spending one year on one side of the mountains and the next year on the other. It keeps things interesting."

"I think I'm going to Stormbrook," I said, and the words surprised me a little. But as I examined why that answer had pushed past my lips, I realized that it was the idea of being with the Hatchers that appealed to me—being a part of them, having Maddox and Marshall watching out for me. If I was going to travel, I wanted to go with them, and I knew they were going to Stormbrook. Of course, that was assuming a great deal. I had no reason to believe they would want me to travel with them, much less have the room or the resources. I could try to pay them, of course, but that was problematic as well. But I just couldn't imagine not going with Maddox if that was an

option. I felt a firm and steady pull toward him, and I had a feeling it wouldn't go away any time soon.

"You've already chosen a side, have you?" Ludly asked.

"I suppose."

"Fine, but I still think we should try it tonight, then we'll know whether we should continue to pursue the idea for the spring festivals."

I breathed deep and made a quick decision. "Yes, let's do that." He clapped his hands together. "Can you come work with us now?"

Maddox

I hadn't seen her today, and it wasn't as though I'd stayed in the tent. I'd found several excuses to wander around the festival as nervous energy prompted me to find Elise and check on her. But she'd eluded me all day. Was that on purpose? Laws, I hoped not. If she was this determined to avoid me, there was no way she would accept my family's offer.

After I'd eaten my evening meal, I left my father by the fire in front of our tent and went searching again. I almost hoped I didn't find her, since the sun had set and the best thing for her would be to already be settled on whatever spot of ground she'd claimed as a bed. But I had a sinking feeling that the desperation she'd spoken of earlier would drive her to seek more earnings by performing for the night crowd again.

I found her in the same meadow where I'd found her that first evening, but this time she wasn't singing on her own. She stood a little off to the side, singing a song as Ludly and the Starfire troupe danced, twirling and throwing their fire sticks. They seemed to be coordinating their dance with the story in her song, their movements becoming faster and more chaotic when the tension of the story swelled.

I stood transfixed. I had come with the intent to...I don't know...rescue her? But the impact of the combined efforts of her song and the shock and awe of the fire dancers was mesmerizing. I was relieved that it was Ludly she was working with. He was a good man. Unfortunately, they'd also enlisted the help of Jacobi. As a fire-breather, he prowled about, playing the part of the dragon. Jacobi had always made me nervous with his bent view of decency.

When the song came to its conclusion, Elise and all the fire dancers held their right hands toward the sky, letting the applause wash over them before they each swept into a bow or curtsey. The two female fire dancers swept the perimeter of the crowd to accept coins, though some listeners chose to come directly to Elise and drop their coins into the little nest at her feet. Her smile was vibrant.

I folded my arms, determined to stay until the crowd thinned so that I could speak with both Elise and Ludly. If they planned to continue their joint effort—which I could see would be profitable—I wanted to be certain that Ludly was going to take care of her.

My heart sank at the thought, because it was a viable one. She could earn her living this way. Maybe Ludly would make her part of his troupe. Maybe she could be friends with the other women and they would treat her like one of their own. As I watched the way the whole troupe surrounded and congratulated her, I had to admit that she did not need me.

I'd been convinced that she did, that my family would be the only ones who could help her, but as I continued to watch them, it was obvious now that she had other avenues. She had a choice, and all I could do was just let her choose. So I walked away, telling myself that whatever she chose, I'd try to be happy for her.

Elise

It was Sunday, the last day of the festival, and I was scrambling to figure out what came next. I supposed I could go back and agree to travel with Ludly to Faehurst, but that option left me ill at ease. On the other hand, I didn't want to stay here in Dressle, even if it was with Dorothy and Kat. I needed to travel, but Marshall had never suggested that I could travel with them. Would they think that inappropriate, me traveling with them when I wasn't family? I found the idea appealing, but would they?

I did my best to focus on singing and earning money, because no matter what happened, the undeniable truth was that I needed money.

But when Kat showed up, giving me a smile and a wave before climbing onto the lowest branch of a tree to watch me, all my uncertainty and nervousness came back.

I was in the middle of a song when a duel between Bear the Brave and the White Tiger was announced for the nearby arena and all of my audience left. My voice faded as I didn't see the point in putting in the effort when there was no one to listen.

Overdone applause came from the tree.

Well, not no one. Kat sat there, grinning and clapping.

I tried to roll my eyes, but I couldn't help smiling and even went so far as to give her a lavish curtsey, after which she stopped clapping and her face morphed into seriousness. "Did we scare you off?" she asked.

"What?" I asked, feigning ignorance as I wandered closer. "No. Of course not."

"Yes, we did. You practically ran, and then you avoided Maddox all day yesterday." She leaned her back against the trunk and had one leg perched on the branch, while the other dangled down.

My gaze dropped to the ground as I wondered how to explain it. "It was just...a very surprising offer, that's all. And very kind," I added.

"It's not selfless," she said. "What we're offering, I mean. It's not a one-sided deal. We use the winter months to make the majority of the items that we sell the rest of the year. We all work. My father, Maddox, me, and Dorothy when she's not keeping the girls out of trouble. But Dorothy is going to have her baby. That means she won't have time to help with the sewing, and if this baby is as fussy as Didi was, then I'll likely need to step in to help with the girls and Mouse."

"You make them sound like a lot of trouble."

"When it's too cold for them to run around outside, they are plenty of trouble," she proclaimed, rather dramatically.

I knew she was exaggerating. Mothers with a full bushel of young children worked and cared for their children every day.

"Would it really be so bad to stay with us?" Kat suddenly asked, and as I looked at her frown, I considered for the first time that I might be insulting them by refusing. Did they think I didn't like them? I did. They were lovely. Did I trust them entirely? No, but I knew enough of myself to realize that likely wasn't their fault.

"Come on," she cajoled. "Wouldn't it be nice to have someone else making your meals once in a while?"

I felt my stomach turn over on itself. I hadn't eaten today, and the idea of regular meals was...almost too much to hope for.

"Dorothy seems nice," I commented to avoid the question. "Do the two of you get along?"

"We do. She married my father when I was nine. I was desperate for a mother but ready to hate anyone who tried to mother me. So instead she was just a friend. And before I knew it, my friend was tucking me in at night and holding me when I cried." Her smile was soft as she admitted, "She's very much a mother to me now."

I marveled at her easy honesty. "But you still call her Dorothy?" I asked, shading my eyes as I looked up at her.

Kat nodded. "Calling her Stepmother seems silly. And I remember my own mother too well to give the title to anyone else." She looked me over, her eyes curious. "Do you remember your mother?"

I supposed that question was only fair. "Yes, but she's been gone since I was eleven."

"All the more reason to spend a season with us. Dorothy is always telling me that women need women."

"I'm sure she's right," I conceded, even though it sounded like a luxury instead of a need.

She jumped down from the tree. "So then why won't you just stay with us?" she asked, putting her hands on her hips.

I sighed. "I can't. Not yet, at least. I have to go to Stormbrook. I have to get more experience and practice and exposure. I have to earn more money. I have to..." I trailed off.

She studied me for several moments and I did my best not to squirm. Finally she huffed. "Fine. Just make sure you tell Maddox that you're still considering it. Please?" She pinned me with a demanding stare.

"I will," I said.

She gave a stiff nod and left, leaving me standing there, frowning. She was right. I needed to accept their offer. It was what I wanted, and yes, I needed it. But how exactly did someone accept such a huge gift after they'd practically rejected it outright?

I supposed I would find out.

Maddox

The festival had officially ended last night. One last big hurrah with drinking, dancing and laughter. Now we started the work of moving on to the next place.

I saw Elise wandering around, watching as the travelers broke down their tents and packed them into their wagons. My father and I were doing the same. The last two weeks of the festival season would be spent in Stormbrook and Lorta. Fortunately, Dorothy's baby wasn't due to arrive until midwinter, so having my father come for the next few weeks wouldn't be a problem.

But Elise...Elise might be a problem.

"You'd best go speak with her," my father said from behind me.

"What?"

He pointed his chin in Elise's direction. "Go find out what her plan is. She can't earn money here now that the fair is over, but she has no wagon. Make sure she knows she can travel with us if she has a mind to."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Dorothy would love the company," he said easily.

I scoffed. "I think she's likely to fall in with Ludly and his crowd."

My father gave me a heavy look. "She's only fourteen. She needs someone like Dorothy."

I blinked, stunned. "Fourteen?"

"Yes, didn't I mention? We all thought she was a year or two older than Kat, but it turns out she's younger."

My mind clanged in an attempt to adjust my thinking. She was even more vulnerable than I had believed.

I finished packing the trunk I was working on and then walked over to where Elise stood, her plumed cape draped over her arm. As I approached, she tried to give me a smile.

"Where will you go now?" I asked, ready to get this conversation over with. If she was going to refuse help, I might as well know right up front.

"Um..." she said, looking nervous. "To the next festival."

"With who?" I challenged.

"I'm fine on my own." The way her chin tilted up, I could see her stubbornness peeking out.

"On foot?"

"How do you think I got here?"

She had a point, but that didn't solve the problem. "We're going farther into the mountains. That means bears and mountain lions. You can't travel on your own."

Her eyes widened. "Bears?"

I nodded. "And other large animals."

Her eyes flitted about and she crossed her arms over her stomach.

"Well..." She swallowed, and for a heartbreaking moment, I thought I saw her eyes wet with tears.

"You should travel with us," I blurted.

Her panicked eyes found mine and immediately calmed. "I should?"

"Of course." Had that not been obvious when my family offered her a place with us? "My father sent me over here to tell you just that."

"I—" She swallowed, looking nervous and scared. "Thank you. I was hoping I might be able to do that, but I didn't know if it was an option."

My brow furrowed. "Why would that not be an option?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Your parents suggested staying here with Dorothy. They never mentioned traveling with you."

I let out a heavy sigh. "Oh," I said, my irritation leaking into the ground below me. "I just assumed you knew that—"

"And I can pay you," she said.

Of course she'd want to pay us. Stubborn, independent girl. I nearly groaned. Would she set aside her pride for even a moment? Then I had an idea. "Are you good at cooking over a fire?"

"Of course," she said as though it was an idiotic question. I supposed to her, it was. She'd spend her entire life living out of a wagon, after all.

"Well, Dad and I aren't so keen on it. We make do while we travel, but neither of us are all that good at it. So if you could help us with some of the cooking, that would be payment enough."

She looked at me another moment and then gave a slow nod. "Thank you. But I'll be doing *all* the cooking."

I bit my tongue. If that's what her pride demanded, then so be it. "Fine." At least she'd be safe during our travels, and hopefully by the time we returned, she'd trust us enough to stay the winter with us. I turned to walk back to the tent and heard her follow after me.

"What are you doing now?" she asked.

"Packing up, of course."

"I'll help."

My nostrils flared. "Fine."

I had to examine why it was that her offers to help bothered me so much. It wasn't that I minded help. I appreciated it. But the way she insisted on it, like she owed it to me, or like I expected it of her...it just grated on me.

"I'm going to accept," she said suddenly.

"Accept what?"

"Your parents' offer."

That stopped me in my tracks. "You are?"

She looked up at me, her eyes vulnerable but determined, then gave one solid nod.

"You'll stay the winter with us?" I asked to clarify.

She nodded again.

A breath of relief rushed out of me, and I had to turn away as the worried knot that had constricted my chest for several days finally let go. "Good" was all I let myself say. "Good, I'm glad." What I wanted to say was that it was about time, and it shouldn't have taken her so long to accept the genuine kindness of my parents. But I'd lived enough years to know it wasn't that simple. Fourteen-year-old girls who were utterly alone in the world had every reason not to trust people.

Elise

The Hatchers' wagon was not nearly as comfortable as the wolf wagon, but that wasn't surprising. This wagon was built for occasional travel. It was filled with all their supplies and didn't have room for any of us to sleep

in it. My brothers' wagon had been built to travel constantly while being lived in.

Though it was a relief to have a sense of safety and people who seemed willing to look out for me, adjusting to traveling with Marshall and Maddox was...taxing.

I was determined to earn my keep, so the first night, I slept fitfully, worried that any movement would wake Maddox or Marshall, who slept on the ground close to me, worried that I would sleep too deeply and not rise early enough to start the morning fire. When just a hint of dawn was in the sky, I got up carefully and made my way out from under the wagon. Both men had insisted I sleep under its shelter, which was so kind but also made me feel guilty.

So I crept over and gathered what I needed to start a fire, then tip-toed back to the wagon to gather a pot to boil water. I knew how much Marshall liked tea, and the least I could do was have some ready when he woke. But when I pulled the pot from the wagon, the things that had been around it collapsed in on themselves, clattering and banging together.

Marshall sat bolt upright as Maddox sat up more slowly.

I winced and cowered, panic filling my chest, knowing that if such a thing had happened with my brothers, the consequences would have left bruises.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. "I'm so sorry. I was just wanting to prepare hot water so that—"

"The sun hasn't even risen, Elise," Marshall said as he stood, rubbing at his eyes.

"I know," I said, digging my thumb into the palm of my other hand. "I know, I was just hoping..." My voice trailed off as he came closer, and I took a step back when he reached out a hand.

But he didn't grab my arm the way my brothers would have. He just looped a fatherly arm around my shoulders and nudged me back toward my bedroll. "That's a nice idea, but there's no need for us to be up so early. Go back to sleep. We'll get going in a couple hours."

I wordlessly did as he directed, shocked by his calm voice and even calmer demeanor. I lay down stiffly, watching as he climbed into his own bedroll.

Looking over at Maddox, I saw him blinking sleepily at me. "He's right," he murmured. "Might as well get a little more rest." Then he rolled over and

settled down again.

I rolled over as well, my heart slowing as I realized that this might be the way it was from now on, and wondering if I'd ever get used to it.

Maddox

After two days of travel, we arrived in Stormbrook and set up our tent amongst all the others. Each evening, we invited Elise to sit with us at the fire with some of the others, but the first several evenings, she declined. It felt like she was hiding from everyone, but I couldn't figure out why.

During the days, she would wander the festival, seeming confident in the daylight with her costume. She always returned for meals, and was so skilled at cooking over an open fire that I was happy to eat whatever she made.

It was the last day of the Stormbrook festival and Elise had yet to return, though the lunch hour was waning. So I started to pull some supplies out, not wanting her to think that Dad and I were incapable of feeding ourselves. I was slicing some bread when she returned, hurrying around the back of the tent.

"Afternoon," I said.

"Oh," she said, stopping in her tracks. "I'm sorry. I lost track of time."

"Nothing to worry about," I said, but I wasn't sure she heard me. She immediately took the knife from my hands and took over the task.

"I know we had an agreement, and I don't want you or your father to think that I'm not going to hold up my end." Her smile was too bright when she looked at me.

"It's really not—"

"I'll be sure to keep better track of time from now on."

I kept silent, watching her nervous movements. Nothing I said seemed to make a difference, so instead I just sat back and whistled, not knowing how else to put her at ease.

Maybe it had been a mistake to invite her along with us. Maybe traveling with two strange men was too nerve-wracking. I hated that she seemed to feel so indebted to us, like we were keeping track of everything she ate and every chore she accomplished. Perhaps she would have been better off staying with Dorothy and Kat. Perhaps.

After she'd handed me my portion, she plated a second helping and stood. "I'll take this to your father."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate it as much as I do," I said with a big grin, which thankfully earned a small smile from her in return.

Later that evening, I invited her to wander with me, hoping I could help her to push past whatever fear kept her from interacting with the others.

"Oh," she said, looking surprised. "Where?"

I gave a shrug. "We could go watch the night performers. The Starfire troupe isn't here, but I think I saw at least one juggler who likes to use fire on occasion."

"Juggle with fire?"

My brow furrowed, wondering why this was a surprise to her. She'd grown up at these festivals. "You haven't seen a fire juggler before?"

She shook her head and looked away. "I always stuck close to the wagon after sunset."

Interesting. I understood caution when it came to a young girl, but it seemed odd that her parents hadn't given her a chance to see some of the most fascinating acts. "Would you like to see?" I asked.

She nodded with enthusiasm.

As we wandered, it was clear that most of the crowds were around the brewers' tents. But we were easily able to find the juggler. He was using small torches, flipping them up in the air and then catching them by the handle. I'd seen it many times, but it was always fascinating. Twice the people closest to us got a little rowdy, and in response, Elise would edge closer to me. Not close enough to touch, but close enough that I could feel her anxiety. I wasn't sure if it was people in general she was wary of, or if it was the way the men pushed and roughed around.

We continued wandering and ended up finding Jacobi. He was breathing fire for a group of younger women who seemed more interested in his shirtless torso than the fire-breathing. It was a common tactic of his and one he used successfully. Elise and I watched for a few minutes, but as he was taking his bows, I asked, "Shall we head back?" and she nodded.

I'd gone several paces before I realized that Elise was not at my side, so I turned back and found her speaking with Jacobi. I held back, waiting to see if she would finish the conversation and join me, but then Jacobi edged a little closer, and Elise fell back a step. I examined her stance and realized

she was tense, her hands tightly clutched over her stomach. Jacobi moved forward again. She retreated in equal distance.

What I wanted to do was walk over, get in Jacobi's face, and tell him to back off. Instead I walked up at an easy pace and stopped beside and just a little in front of her. Hopefully, my presence would put her more at ease.

Elise

My breathing calmed as soon as Hatcher took up his stance beside me. After a few minutes, Jacobi seemed to realize I wasn't responding to his advances and left off to go chase a different girl.

Maddox stepping up to protect me and act as a silent support that evening was just the first of many. He never said anything; he never made a spectacle of himself, but he regularly put himself on *my* side. It had been a long time since someone had been squarely on my side. My brothers' protection had been inconsistent and conditional. My mother had done her best, but her weak body had only been able to do so much. My father...I thought he had protected me, though it was more of a feeling than an actual memory. But Maddox took on the role with gusto and without my asking, and every time he did, I breathed a sigh of relief.

We traveled from Stormbrook to Lorta, and each day I was a little more at ease. I was still nervous and determined to pull my own weight, but those days began to take on a dreamy quality. A dream where I didn't have to worry about the next meal or where I would spend the next night. I sang by day and tried to joke with Maddox and Marshall around the fire by night. Marshall treated me very much like a father would, and Maddox was a calm, steady presence. I breathed easier when he was around. He became my friend and my protector, and it became impossible to ignore my growing infatuation for him. I tried not to, I really did. But my heart was so desperate for any scrap of caring and affection that whenever he stood up for me—or even just smiled—it took all my willpower to shove my feelings down. I knew he wouldn't ever reciprocate—he was older, smarter, and more confident—but it gave me something to daydream about.

Lorta was on the eastern coast of Winberg, and while I'd visited plenty of coastal towns and villages in the southern part of Winberg, the coast of Lorta was jagged cliffs instead of rocky beaches. There was a wildness, a rugged quality that made me want to stand on those cliffs and breathe it all

in. But I only ever got glimpses of it since the festival grounds were inland enough that we could barely smell the sea.

When we returned to Dressle, I settled into the Hatchers' family life. Maddox's protectiveness eased when we were at home, but any time we were out and about, he kept an eye on me. It was a little like having two fathers. Him and Marshall. That was what I told myself in order to keep my infatuation in check. He took care of me like a father, and I'd do well to remember it.

Someone was always at the Hatchers' shop during the days, but in the evenings, everyone was at home. Mouse slept in the room with his parents, Hatcher had a bed in the corner of the main room, and I slept up in the loft with Kat, Didi, and Twyla.

Twyla and Didi were excited to have me as a playmate, though I'd been worried that I wouldn't know how. I'd certainly never cared for any children before. But all the girls really wanted was to play, to pretend, to go on imaginary adventures. That, I could easily do. So when we couldn't be helpful in assisting their mother, I would take them on adventures. We would bundle up against the cold and go to the stream to find all the fanciful shapes drawn into the ice that coated its surface. Or we'd build forts in the corner of the house and pretend to be hiding from a great beast or a dragon, and we'd have to whisper so we wouldn't be found out.

Our adventures gave me ideas for songs, which I sang for them and then listened to their ideas and changed them. I was surprised that making up songs came so easily to me, but I dove into it and had a whole collection of my own songs by the time spring came.

Three Years Later

Elise

"Hatcher!" I called out as I burst into Maddox's tent, pushing past the swaths of fabric. I'd abandoned calling him Maddox more than a year ago, preferring to call him by his last name. It just suited him better. "I need a new headpiece," I continued without waiting for him to answer. I'd been living with his family for the past three years, so he was used to me bursting in and taking up space.

"Did you ruin the old one or lose it?" he asked, his voice sounding bored. This was familiar territory for both of us.

"Neither," I said in my defense. "I have it right here. I just want to try something different." It turned out that having a good friend who was one of the best festival costumers around was a distinct advantage for a young songstress.

Hatcher wandered into my line of vision as I was fingering a featherbedecked hat. The style was typically for men, but such inconsistency might lend an air of mystery to the Starling.

As I continued to consider my options, Hatcher tugged the older headpiece out of my hand where it dangled at my side. I had to use long pins to keep the many-feathered plume in place, nestled in my hair, and I'd found it a little difficult to move. I was afraid it might fall off.

"It is broken," Hatcher declared after only a moment of inspecting it. I snapped to attention. "What? No," I cried in dismay, my shoulders sinking. "I was so careful with this one. I was sure I had not bent even a feather." I reached for it, determined to prove him wrong, but he held it just out of reach.

"I'm only teasing, Elise," he said with an apologetic smile. "It's in perfect order, just as you said."

I huffed, a combination of indignation and relief. "You'd best watch your tongue. You know that if I tell your sisters you've treated me unjustly, they will take my side."

He gave a heavy sigh. "It's a testament to your charm that my loyal sisters would so easily abandon me for you."

I smiled. "I'm fairly certain it's a testament to my ability to play pretend and entertain little girls."

"And everyone else," he mumbled. "Kat's just as taken with you as Twyla and Didi are."

I shrugged. "Kat and I understand each other." She was the sister I'd never had—older and sometimes wiser. She was someone I could always confide in, but she also wasn't afraid to put me in my place.

"Why do you want a new headpiece this time?"

"I was thinking it would be good to add a little mystery, perhaps cover a portion of my face with a veil or even a mask?" All of my wardrobe suggestions—no matter how confident I was when making them—ended up coming out as questions when I spoke to Hatcher. Because despite my somewhat abundant creativity, when it came to costumes, Hatcher's taste was unparalleled. At least in my opinion.

He hummed as he looked me over. "It would need to be subtle. Your expressive face is part of what sells your storytelling."

I knew he was right, but the truth was that my need for a little mystery had more to do with wanting to protect my anonymity, at least in certain villages.

It was the beginning of the autumn festival season and we were in Viago, but we would be traveling to Duskmoor next. Though Viago was separated from the southern half of Winberg by the widest part of the River Wrenley and thus was unlikely to be visited by my brothers, Duskmoor was less than two days' journey from Murrwood, and once in a while those who usually stuck to the southern route would venture there. Now that my brothers could no longer show their faces in Murrwood, I had to consider that they would turn up in Duskmoor as an alternative. So each year, I found a reason to wear a headpiece that obscured my features while we were in Duskmoor. Hatcher seemed to enjoy the challenge, and it helped me feel more prepared when we ventured into the part of the country where I was most likely to

encounter my brothers. They'd always seen me as a tool to be used for their gain, and I was sure that if they ever saw me, they would do their utmost to pull me back into their schemes—by force if necessary. Either that, or they would be so angry by my abandonment that they would do all they could to hurt me, both physically and emotionally. So I had to avoid them at all costs, but it was also essential that I continue my act and constantly draw a crowd.

I'd started to make a name for myself. It had taken a couple of years, but my persona as the Starling was fairly well established, helped along by my decision to stray from common songs and come up with my own instead. Not that they were magnificent songs, but I'd started telling my own stories. I'd used the grand adventures of the beast that I'd grown up performing with my brothers, and I'd transformed them into something new. I never mentioned a wolf or a beast in my songs. Instead it was a hawk, an osprey, or a dragon—a flying creature who was a formidable opponent to a small starling.

"If you like this one, we could make it work."

Hatcher's words pulled my attention back to him. He had picked up the feathered men's hat I'd been considering earlier. "You think so?"

He nodded. "We could add a short veil that could hang over the brim."

"Would Marshall approve of you mutilating another of your fine pieces for me?" I asked.

A deep voice sounded from the far depths of the tent. "You know you're welcome to anything you'd like, Elise."

Hatcher shook his head, even as a smile tugged at his lips. "You know my father adores you."

I wound my way through the tent until I found Marshall tucked in the back corner, bent over his work table, a pot of tea at the ready. "Thank you, Marshall," I said as I leaned over and left a kiss on the top of his head. "And I will happily pay for it."

"Mm-hmm," he murmured without looking up from the intricate beadwork he was adding to a collar.

On my way back to the front of the tent, I took a few minutes to tidy the merchandise. I always did my best to help here when I could, knowing that the debt I owed the Hatchers could never be paid.

"Are you certain about the hat and veil?" Hatcher asked as I made my way back to his work table that sat near one of the open sides of the tent.

"Yes, please." I rested a hand on his arm and went up on my toes to kiss his cheek. "And thank you."

I'd long ago set aside any thoughts of romance where Hatcher was concerned. He'd courted a young woman for a time the summer after we met, and I knew that eventually—soon even—he would settle down with a wife. For now, he was simply my best friend and the person I trusted most in the world.

I slipped from the tent, acutely aware of my good fortune. Finding a place with Hatcher and his family had been a miracle I didn't deserve. The Hatchers were everything my family had never been, and somehow they'd seen me as worthy of their friendship.

Maddox

Elise left in a flurry, the way she always did. The ghost of her lips pressed to my cheek was familiar and haunting. It was the way she always left me, her sisterly affection for me encapsulated in a friendly kiss. Friendly and nothing more. She was oblivious to the effect she had on me. Elise was a study in contradiction. Tough and vulnerable. Innocent and world-weary. She still had never told me her last name, so I was left to believe that name was too painful to take on when it represented so much loss. She'd been forced to grow up too fast by the death of her family and was therefore older than she should be. But she was younger too—younger in the sense that the idea of a man being attracted to her still hadn't crossed her mind, even at seventeen. As the Starling, she had plenty of admirers. She recognized that admiration, and she could accept it when playing that role, but believing that someone could admire her simply for being herself... unthinkable.

I knew this, because I was in love with her.

I'd been in love with her for nearly two years and she had yet to notice. When she first accepted our help, she'd been skittish and awkward unless she was performing. But after the first year, she'd stepped out of her fear and truly become *herself*—and she was amazing. Suddenly, instead of being the confident protector, I was tripping over my own feet and feeling tonguetied around her. Still, we'd settled into a comfortable friendship. She treated me like a brother and I let her, because the only thing I'd ever wanted for

Elise was happiness, security, and a life without fear. And if I could give her that while acting in the role of brother...so be it.

But I'd given up trying to convince myself that I didn't want more. I clung to the hope that someday she would see me as more than a friend, that she'd trust me fully and let me take care of her in all the ways I wanted to. If I could just be patient enough and wait for her to be ready, maybe it was possible.

Elise

Over the years, Ludly and I had developed the habit of doing one night performance at each festival. The Starfire troupe were happy to combine efforts with me on whichever night we believed would be busiest. Songs about dragons were always the most popular because they could truly come alive with the troupe dancing and Jacobi breathing fire.

They were still my most lucrative performances, which was good, because the trade-off wouldn't have been worth it otherwise.

Ludly and his crew were always supportive, but there had still been incidents that made me deeply uncomfortable. Some of them had involved overly enthusiastic and overly inebriated men, while others involved Jacobi, who liked to tease and flirt in a constant and often aggressive manner.

So Hatcher and I had developed a system. He was always there for my night performances with the fire dancers. He would watch, and if at any point I removed my headpiece, that was his signal to intervene. It seemed ridiculous that I would need to have a guard watching over me, but I simply couldn't be at ease if Hatcher wasn't there to support me.

I relied on him, and I dreaded the day that some lass would catch his eye and I'd have to give up his constant companionship, but I knew it would happen. And then I supposed I'd either have to stop doing night performances, or I'd have to ask Ludly for more help. Neither option appealed to me.

The sun was setting and I was in the clearing where the acrobats, jugglers and dancers performed. The fire dancers and I were preparing for our performance. Well, most of us. Ludly hadn't arrived yet, which was odd, but we went ahead and ran through the routine to be sure that I knew where they would be dancing and they knew when I would be doing broad gestures that would need to be avoided by their fire sticks.

"Gather 'round, crew!" Ludly said as he hustled into the middle of us. We all gave him our attention as he stood with his hands clasped in front of his chest, like his excitement was too much to contain. "I've been eavesdropping."

"Boooo!" one of the girls yelled from the back.

Ludly held up his hands. "I know. I know. It's usually the worst idea because everyone is a critic. But not this time," he said with relish. "I heard a large group saying they've come to watch this performance because they've heard it's one of the very best."

Noises of surprise and appreciation rippled through our ranks.

"In fact." Ludly held up a finger and paused for effect. "They declared, quite definitively, that the only other act that might rival ours is the Wolfe brothers!"

Everyone cheered. Everyone but me. I shrank, my chest heating and my breath quickening.

"That's right," he said over the hooting and hollering. "I know many of you had a chance to see them a few years ago in Murrwood, so you know what a compliment this is."

Everyone murmured in agreement while I tried not to throw up.

"Will they be in Murrwood when we get there next month?" someone asked.

"That I don't know," Ludly answered. "They weren't there last year, but if they attend this year, it will be telling to see who draws the bigger crowd."

More cheering.

"Now, let's get to work."

Everyone dispersed to get ready for our show while I stood frozen, hating that simply the mention of my brothers' names would leave me weak and trembling.

It took me longer than I would have liked to shake off the feeling and return my focus to the task at hand, but I did it, conjuring my Starling persona and wrapping myself in her confidence.

When it was time to perform, I sang with precision, power and feeling. I tried to focus my attention on the audience to draw them in, but my eyes kept being pulled back to Hatcher. He leaned against a tree, his arms folded as he watched me. His gaze never wavered when I met his eyes, and I found strength in the way he watched me, always approving and often with a

smile. When my nerves would rise up or the fear of a possible encounter with my brothers would cause my hands to shake, all I had to do was look his way and my soul went calm.

Normally, I would have lingered to smile and greet audience members in the hopes of getting a few more coins when our act ended. Instead, I took the headpiece from my hair nearly the moment it ended and went to find Hatcher in the audience. He was already making his way toward me, a look of concern marring his brow. He reached my side and wrapped a comforting arm around my back. I latched on to him and he swept me away, his surety and strength allowing me to breathe.

By the time we had made our way through the various tents and returned to the fire behind Hatcher's tent, I was calm but exhausted.

"What happened?" Hatcher asked as he helped me to unclasp the brooch that held my "wings" in place. "I didn't see anyone approach you, so your signal surprised me." He took the costume piece and set it aside.

"It wasn't someone there," I said as I sat down on a log that we had dragged over for this purpose. "It was..." How could I explain this to him? "Memories, I suppose." I looked across the fire to where he stood.

"Memories?"

I nodded, and in the ensuing silence, Hatcher sat down across from me, but he didn't question. I knew I tended to snap at him when he asked too many questions, so he rarely did. It was unfair of me. He didn't deserve my anger just for wanting to know me better, but fear makes even the kindest person into a monster on occasion. "Someone mentioned my family just before the performance," I admitted. "That's all." I tried to shrug it off, but I could see from his expression that he knew my admission was a significant one.

"What happened to them?" he asked carefully.

I held his gaze but didn't say anything. I wasn't sure I was ready to tell him this story. At least not all of it, but perhaps I could share a portion. As I tried to decide what I could say, the silence stretched long enough that he said, "You don't have to tell me."

I knew that, but I wanted to. So I took a slow breath, preparing for the inevitable onslaught of anger and sadness that would accompany the telling of this story. "My father died when I was seven. The story went that there was a band of men who came around with weapons and threats, wanting to steal our wagon—our home, our entire livelihood." I recited it much like

my mother had, time and time again. "And my father fought them off one by one. By the end, he was triumphant and all assailants had either died or fled. But his wounds were too great"—I swallowed—"and he died a few days later from infection." I was grateful I didn't remember that night. I only knew the story because it had been repeated so often, first by my mother and then by my brothers. Looking back, I had to wonder if my mother had turned it into such a heroic tale in order to make his death mean something other than just pain, desperation and loss. My brothers had repeated it as an example of family loyalty and the reason we should never bow to the demands of others. "My mother wasn't the same after that. I've often wondered if she didn't want the life of a peddler and a festival wanderer." I lifted a helpless shoulder. "But that's what my father was, and in choosing him, she chose that life. So when my father was gone, the difficulties of living every day with no assurance that there would be a next became too much for her. I think she gave up." My voice broke and I had to look down as I tried to blink away my tears.

I heard him stand and then felt him sit on the log beside me before draping an arm over my shoulders and pulling me in so I could rest my head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Elise."

I just nodded. There was so much more to the story, but sharing that much was enough. I let his warm strength comfort me for a time as I stared into the fire. I was surprised that the anger didn't come. The sadness was there, but the anger didn't rise up the way it usually did. I was comfortable there beside Hatcher, and after a few minutes, my eyes started to blink slowly. "I'm exhausted," I confessed and climbed to my feet.

"Sleep well," he said.

I readied for bed and went to climb under the wagon where my bedroll was laid out, happy to let the calm night enfold me.

Maddox

The shouts and laughter of the festival melded with the sound of my needle running through the fabric in my hands. Working on something for Elise was both a creative challenge and a joy. The work never felt like a chore because I enjoyed seeing her wear things that I'd created. Knowing she wore things I'd made with my own hands created a certain intimacy that appealed to me.

Of course I never told her that, because even in my head, it sounded...not quite right. Like I was a creepy weasel of a man who wanted to dress her up like a doll. But truly, that wasn't what it was. It just made me proud to see her wearing my work, which was why I was so carefully stitching the decorations onto the hat that she'd chosen.

She'd confided in me last night, revealing just a little bit of her brokenness. But today she was back to her usual self. It was the last day of the Viago festival, and tomorrow we'd be off to Duskmoor.

She was in the back of the tent with my father, helping him cut out fabric pieces.

It had been three years, and still she thought she had to earn her keep. No matter how many times we told her otherwise, she didn't seem to believe that she was part of us now, that we wanted her for her and not for the extra help she could provide. I just shook my head and didn't say anything. She didn't like it when we told her she didn't need to do so much, and she liked it even less when we thanked her. The number of times I'd heard her say, "It's the least I can do" was far too many to count.

I heard her come up behind me as I pulled a thimble from the pouch on my belt but kept working, even when she leaned over my shoulder, her loose braid bumping against my back.

"You make such pretty things," she said with a sigh, her breath puffing against my neck.

My fingers froze as want curled inside me. It didn't help that she crossed her arms and rested them on my shoulder before settling her chin on her wrists and leaning into my back.

"Do you think you'll finish it today?" she asked, and I felt her turn her head to look at me, which meant that if I were to turn and look at her, the only logical next move would be to kiss her. Instead I cleared my throat and made my fingers continue with the stitching.

"I do, yes." *I'd do anything for you. Just ask, and I'll go to the end of the kingdom for it.* I inwardly sighed. If my friends knew how I pined, they'd call me a sop for sure. But they didn't know the agony of having the woman you love *right there*, and yet not within reach.

Elise reached forward to finger the bits of lace that I was using to create the illusion of feathers. "This is going to be marvelous."

I puffed up at the compliment, and when she left to go sing her songs, I was both relieved and heartbroken by her absence.

I finished the work on the hat, and when she returned that evening, I presented it to her with a flourish.

"It's perfect!" she exclaimed and immediately set it on her head, turning this way and that to show me from all angles. "How does it look?"

"Beautiful." Ethereal, lovely. Not the hat. Her.

"Thank you, Hatch," she said, and I braced myself against the bittersweetness of having her pop up on her toes and kiss my cheek. It never got easier.

"You're welcome," I said and we both got to work. There was dinner to be made and eaten, and then we'd start packing the tent for the journey to Duskmoor.

Elise

Our week in Duskmoor had been good for all of us. The skies had threatened rain two of the days, but each storm had obligingly blown over. We heard that the weather as a whole had been kind to Duskmoor this year. Crops had been plentiful, which meant many villagers were not only feeling happy to celebrate their harvest, but also seemed to have a few more coins to spare than usual.

It was the morning of our last day in Duskmoor, and I was standing on the little wooden stool that I used to give myself extra height, deep in the middle of my most popular song story when I spotted him.

He was standing in the crowd, his arms folded over his chest, a smile on his face.

Robert White.

I stuttered in the midst of the song but managed to pull my eyes away from his and continue with my tale. Each time I glanced back, he was still there, still in the same position, smiling as he watched me.

It was a pleasant surprise to see him, a friend from the past, but it was also disconcerting. I'd been vigilant in looking out for my brothers, and even though the entire week had passed and they clearly weren't here, I'd kept my veiled hat on to obscure my identity. But seeing Robert here was a surprise, especially so late in the week. Could there be others here that I'd known from my days traveling the southern route? I fully anticipated seeing familiar faces in Murrwood since that was the village visited by performers from both the northern and southern routes. Not all of the southerners made the extra effort to be in Murrwood, but enough that their presence was not odd. However, I had not expected to see any of them here in Duskmoor. Were there any others that I knew who had wandered this festival without

me seeing them? The idea of someone recognizing me and getting word to my brothers made my gut clench. Would there be tales told of finding the recalcitrant, wandering sister? The lost starling? But as I scanned the crowd again and again, I never saw any other familiar faces from my years traveling down south. My anxiety eased. It was only Robert.

And it had clearly been an age since I'd seen him. He was handsome now. He had not been handsome before, I was almost sure of that. There was a confidence to the lift of his brow and a strength in his shoulders that sent a distinct shiver down my spine. I hoped he would stay until the end. He would wait and speak to me, wouldn't he? Robert had been the last person from my old life that I'd spoken to. Surely his presence and his smile were a good omen, an indication of good things to come.

As I reached the pinnacle of the song, I pulled my gaze from his, concentrating on singing about how the Starling flew high, high into the sky, the fearsome dragon chasing after her with the steady, thrumming beat of its wings pounding over and over. My voice rose with it and I reached toward the sky, toward freedom with my right hand while the other stretched to my side, displaying the full array of plumage that adorned not only my cape, but my dress as well. The dragon grew closer and my singing became more frantic. Then I lifted my left hand higher, causing the cloak to fall behind my shoulder, revealing the swath of bright red fabric at my side. In that moment, I cut my voice off. I swayed, a look of confusion and pain in my eyes as I slowly lowered my head to look down upon the wound.

The crowd surrounding me had fallen silent, some even holding their breath. Then my voice broke the stillness, the note high and keening, but quiet.

So long I've fled the monster
So long my life has been
But now my days are over
My wings are weak and thin
Mother Moon, take me home
Father Dawn, remember me
Remember the day your Starling fell
And joined her sisters three

As my voice faded, I pressed my hand to my heart and tucked my chin into my shoulder, signifying the death of the Starling.

Silence rang for a few moments, which was how I knew I had done my job well, then the applause broke out. I remained in that deathly still position until I saw through my cracked eyelids that several coins had been dropped into the nest that lay at my feet.

Then I gracefully straightened and gave a delicate, sweeping bow, thanking my audience and keeping up a general feeling of dramatic finality for as long as I could. The more time I gave people to bask in my presence, the more likely it was that they would dip into their pockets and say thank you with a few bits or maybe even a copper.

The crowd dissipated, and I gradually fell out of my Starling bearing. I swept into an elegant curtsey to signify to those still around me that the performance was indeed done. When I straightened, my eyes shot to where Robert had been standing, anxious to be reunited with him, but he was walking away, just like the last few observers. He wove his way through the crowd, hands in his pockets. He didn't look back.

A frown creased my face. I had expected him to stay and say hello. Why would he leave without even acknowledging me? I stepped down off of my box and picked up my nest of coins before going in the direction Robert had departed. But the crowd was difficult to navigate in my costume while carrying my wooden perch, and I soon gave up. The disappointment that washed over me was more than was rational, and my eyes were stinging, which was ridiculous.

The busy movement and cacophony of voices that were so familiar to me suddenly became distorted and uncomfortable. I'd always considered Robert a friend, and I had so few of those that to have him dismiss me without a word left me feeling off balance.

I shook my shoulders, determined to push aside such nonsensical thoughts, and turned back toward Hatcher's tent.

Maddox

Elise huffed her way into the tent, her brow furrowed. She passed me by without a word and went straight to the back corner where she always changed. Elise had started out with just the one simple cape for her starling costume, but I'd made many for her over the years. First I'd just improved

the original, making it more elaborate and eye-catching. Then I'd made her a full dress with a cape that looked like wings. I'd continued to make her different variations, some better for daylight and one specifically suited for night performances.

It was mid-afternoon and I couldn't figure out why she'd be changing now. "Is everything all right?" I hollered back to her.

"Yes. I'm well enough," she snipped back.

Drat. Something was very wrong. "Was the audience a bit too frugal today?" I asked, hoping to prompt her into telling me the truth. I knew it wasn't about money. Having grown up in the festivals, she always took the ups and downs of people's generosity in stride.

"Nothing is wrong, Hatch," she insisted. "Blast." She huffed in annoyance and my throat swelled, knowing what was coming next. That sound of defeat meant that she needed help, and she was going to ask me for it. After an overly dramatic growl, she finally spoke. "Can you help me? This knot won't budge."

I swallowed. "Of course." I'd perfected the casual response. The first time she'd asked for help with her clothing, I'd nearly fallen over. Kat and I were close, but she'd never asked for help with wardrobe. Of course, we had Dorothy for such things, and Kat wasn't a performer who had to change behind a hanging curtain in the back corner of our tent.

I pushed the curtain aside and ducked under the rope that held it up. Elise's back was to me. In her haste to get out of her costume, she hadn't loosened the laces enough before pulling her arms out of the sleeves. The bodice was bunched up around her hips where she'd tried to force it down, and her hands rested at her waist, her fingers tapping against the cording of her stays. I was grateful she'd never needed help with *those*, at least. Still, each time she so casually asked for help in and out of her clothing, I went a little more mad. I wasn't uptight or a prude, but I was in love with this woman, and being this close and yet so very far away was torture.

I braced myself and straightened the fabric so that I could get at the laces she'd tangled in her hurry and frustration. As I picked at the knot, I had to ask. "Are you going to tell me what has you so upset?"

"I'm not—"

"And don't tell me you're not upset. I know you too well for that, so why not just share the burden and see if I can help?"

She sniffed in her stubborn way.

"Come on, Lisey," I cajoled, using the nickname only I called her. "Just spit it out."

She glanced over her shoulder at me, her eyes raw and vulnerable but somehow filled with trust. "I saw an old friend of mine today."

"Mm-hmm?" I tried not to be too excited about that. Elise kept to herself, trusting few and letting even fewer get close to her. The fact that she'd so easily become part of our family spoke more to her desperation at the time she'd met us than it did to anything else. So the idea that she could be reunited with an old friend was exciting, as was the fact that she was volunteering information about her past.

"I was singing my song, glancing over the crowd," she continued wistfully, "and there he was."

My stomach dropped at the word he.

"He watched my whole song, and I expected him to stay and at least say hello to me, but he walked off before I could even catch his eye afterward. Why would he do that?" Anger and hurt seemed to swirl around her.

"I don't know," I answered as my envy raged. "How long has it been since you've seen him?"

"I said goodbye to him a week before I met you."

Elise had never told me all the details of what had happened to her before she found us. I only knew she had no family and she'd spent her entire life as a festival rat, following the southern route before coming to Dressle and becoming the Starling. "Perhaps he didn't recognize you," I suggested as the knot in her laces came loose.

She scoffed, pulling at the laces to loosen them more and pushing the dress down around her ankles before stepping out of it. "I don't look that different," she said, her voice sharp.

I started backing out of the little changing room, avoiding the sight of Elise in only her chemise and stays with practiced determination. I ducked under the rope and let the curtain fall between us, taking a deep breath and trying to cool the heat that filled my chest and head. "Perhaps you'll see him again." The words were bitter on my tongue.

"When?" she asked. "This is our last day here. I'm not going to find him."

"This day isn't over yet. If it's that important, you could wander around and find him. Does he work the festivals? Would he have a booth?" I wanted to yell at myself to *stop being so blasted helpful*.

The sound of rustling fabric stopped and I could almost hear her thinking. "Maybe," she said quietly. "But what if he's here with his family..." She trailed off and I wasn't sure if she was talking to me anymore.

"Do you not like his family?" I asked, hoping to tease out any little detail she might share about her past life.

"It isn't that. I just...want to avoid the people who used to know me."

Her words were a little nonsensical. She was desperate to find this former friend yet wanted to avoid anyone who used to know her? "You're not avoiding him," I pointed out.

"He's different."

"How?"

She sighed again, not in annoyance, but just...tiredness? "I can't explain it."

I left it at that. Elise was closed off about some subjects, but I'd learned that she was nearly always honest. If she said she couldn't explain it, then I knew she'd reached the end of what she was willing to say, and I had to accept that. "Well, then maybe he'll be in Murrwood."

I could practically hear her frowning. "Maybe."

"And if you do find him, I hope he's as friendly as you remember him." Friendly and nothing more.

I hated the jealousy that burned in my gut. It wasn't right. For the thousandth time, I wished that I could tell her of my feelings just like any other bloke would, but I knew I couldn't. She wasn't just some girl. She'd become a part of our family, and that had been a hard-won battle. If I burdened her with the knowledge of just how much I cared for her, I was terrified that it would scare her away—not just from me, but from the safety and security that she'd found with us. So until she gave me some indication that she returned my feelings, I would keep being the friend she deserved.

I knew Elise, and yes, I loved her, but that didn't mean I had the right to keep her from anyone else. She was fiercely independent in that way, determined to choose who she would associate with and when. So if she wanted to find this friend, I had no doubt she would.

But I still hated the idea.

Elise

I had mixed feelings about the Murrwood festival. On the one hand, I was confident that I wouldn't run into my brothers. On the other hand, this was also the place with the greatest crossover of travelers from the north and south, so the likelihood of running into someone I used to know—and who still knew my brothers—was higher than the rest of the northern festival circuit.

Of course, that also meant I might find Robert here. The thought made me nervous and excited. I'd tried over the past several days to come up with every reasonable explanation I could that he would have walked away. Perhaps he was due to be somewhere else. Perhaps he thought I was too busy to visit with an old friend. I'd come up with enough explanations that I felt fairly certain if I encountered him again, we could greet each other as friends.

So after I'd prepared and eaten our morning meal with Marshall and Hatcher behind the tent and scrubbed the dishes alongside Hatcher at the stream nearby, I took meticulous care in readying for the day. I selected the costume that I felt most flattered my figure and set my veiled hat atop my head, tilting it enough to offer a modicum of anonymity, but not so much that it truly obscured my face.

When I was ready, I helped Hatcher and Marshall pull the flaps of the tent up on two sides, securing them, and then brought out a few items for display to lure in potential customers.

Then I put on the feathered shawl that Hatcher had made for this particular ensemble before picking up my wooden perch and bidding the Hatchers goodbye.

It was tempting to wander about in an attempt to find Robert, but I tamped down that desire. I felt my debt to the Hatchers too keenly to neglect my own opportunities to earn money. I did well for myself, all things considered. In fact, my success often surprised me, and the coins I brought in sometimes rivaled the sum I used to earn for my brothers. So I would regularly use a portion of it to buy a measure of nuts or some dried fruits to contribute to the Hatchers' food stores. They'd given up telling me it was unnecessary since I vehemently disagreed. It was necessary. If they were going to act as my friends and protectors, feeding me and providing me with a home, I was going to do all I could to support myself and them. The excess money I made was added to my growing stash. I'd never let go of the idea that I would buy my own cart and pony someday, maybe even a wagon. I was keenly aware that at any point, the Hatchers' situation might change and I would be asked to move on.

So, though I fully intended to work all day and not waste time looking for Robert, I did end up seeking out a spot on the opposite end of the festival grounds so that I could at least walk through some of the stalls, keeping an eye out for him. I didn't see any sign of Robert's family, but I did recognize the mark of a fortune teller I used to travel with on occasion, and when I saw movement inside her stall, I turned away, pulling the brim of my hat a little lower.

I chose a spot by the brewer's stall and set down my perch, climbing atop it to give me the extra height that would allow people who heard my voice to actually see where I was and come find me. Then I straightened my spine and shook my shoulders, effectively "fluffing my feathers" before starting in on a song.

The patrons sitting at the spindly wooden tables outside the brewer's tent turned to listen, and I collected a few passersby as an audience.

When I launched into the last verse of my song, I had my hands on my hips, my head and shoulders tilted in a dramatic and playful manner, playing the flirty Starling instead of the Starling who was in trouble. It was then that I spotted Robert. He wasn't watching me this time. Instead he was walking backward through the crowd, facing a couple with their young children as he did a card trick.

I refocused, grateful that the song was nearly at an end, and did my best to finish strong and bold, throwing up a flared hand on the beat following the last note.

I breathed hard while the little crowd clapped. Then I swept into a deep curtsey, holding it for several extra seconds as I heard coins dropping into my nest. Then I swept up, giving a smile as I dropped my Starling stance and waved to the crowd.

A little boy waved back and I blew him a kiss before stepping down. I gathered my coin nest and perch and hurried in the direction I'd seen Robert.

Fortunately, the family he'd been dogging had stopped and were allowing him to show off his tricks. I stood back and watched while he crouched and presented the little girl with a flower from behind her own ear and then pulled an endless scarf from his sleeve to the amazement of the young boy.

The children were well dressed, as were their parents. Not enough to be nobility, but not common either.

After both children let out delighted laughs, Robert tousled the boy's hair and then straightened, accepting the coin that the father held out before tipping his hat and stepping out of their way.

He slipped the coin into his pocket, grinning at the ground as he walked toward me.

I couldn't just let him walk by, so I summoned my courage and as he passed me, I said, "Robert."

He looked up, seeming surprised. "You know me?" he asked.

My heart squeezed. Perhaps all the reasonable explanations I'd come up with were pointless. Perhaps I simply wasn't memorable enough. "You don't recognize me." I had recognized him the moment I'd seen him last week in the crowd, and yet he stared at me without a flicker of recognition.

He looked more closely at me. "Marianne?"

My hope dissipated, replaced by a sizzling and irrational anger at whoever this Marianne was.

"I'm sorry!" he apologized, seeming upset by my clear distress. "Perhaps if you took off your hat and veil, I might get a better look at you."

I blinked, realizing what an idiot I was. Hatcher and I had designed this hat specifically to obscure my identity, and while I had left it perched high originally, I had pulled it low after seeing the familiar fortune teller. I was grateful it worked. I set down my perch and quickly removed the pins so that I could pull the hat and veil from my head, feeling like a fool. "Sorry," I said. "I completely forgot that I was wearing it. Sometimes my costumes become like a second skin."

Once the final pin was removed, I swept the contraption from my head. The moment I lifted my eyes to meet Robert's, I saw surprise and recognition sweep over his face.

"Elise."

I smiled as I let out a relieved sigh. "Hello, Robert."

A grin split his face as his eyes swept over me. "I'm glad to see you looking so well."

"And you," I said, embarrassed by his frank admiration. "I was a little bit hurt when you watched my performance in Duskmoor but didn't bother staying to say hello."

"I would have if I'd known it was you. That was quite a sight to see. I never imagined that the beautiful and mysterious Starling was someone I already knew." His brow scrunched a little, and I imagined he was trying to put the image of me as the Starling together with what he knew of Elise Wolfe. "How come you never sang like that when you were with your brothers?" he asked.

I shrugged, even as I fought the discomfort that scratched at my spine when he mentioned my brothers. "It wasn't part of the act." I looked around, suddenly paranoid that my brothers would show up here, despite the tainted past that they had with the local nobility.

"They aren't here," Robert said as he stepped closer to me.

I looked over at him, embarrassed that he'd read my mind. "Pardon?"
He smiled the kind of smile you give when someone is trying to fool you and it's not working. "Your brothers. The wolf wagon. They aren't here."

The knot in my chest loosened. "I know," I said, even though that was exactly what I'd been worrying about. "Is it just you then? You aren't with your family?"

He nodded. "I've been on my own this season. I know the old timers think it's best to stick with those you know—protection and loyalty and all that. But we visited the same towns and saw the same people year after year."

"You were looking for new marks?" I teased.

The light left his eyes as soon as the words were out of my mouth, replaced by affront. "I don't mark people, Elise. Some of us are content with performing."

I blinked, feeling soundly chastised. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean...my brothers always supplemented their income." I myself used to be a fair

pickpocket. "They said everyone—"

He shook his head. "Not everyone. I know it's a common practice, but it isn't for me."

I should have known. White's parents were good people. And what made me think that anything Daggon and Morley had said was true?

"Do you mark people?" he asked, his curious expression making the accusation sting less.

I shook my head. "No." That was something I'd decided the night I'd left my brothers. I would stay in the festival world, I would perform, but I wouldn't hurt people the way my brothers had. Even though I was done cheating people, I still understood why a lot of festival rats did it.

He looked away and let out a sigh. "See? Most of us aren't so bad, really."

"I know that," I assured him.

He gave me an understanding smile. "To answer your question, no, I wasn't looking for new marks. I was looking for an adventure and new places to explore." He stepped closer, fingering the feathers that rested against my upper arm and making me shiver. "You probably know quite a bit about that. You went off on your own."

I just nodded, pretending that a need for adventure was part of my reasoning even though it had nothing to do with it. It was easier to pretend that I'd fled for the sake of adventure rather than fear. I mustered a smile, determined to salvage this reunion. "I'm happy to see you, Robert."

His smile was soft, his eyes friendly. "I am"—he seemed to falter for a moment—"more happy than I can express that I ran into you."

My heart leapt at his words. He seemed truly glad to have found me, and somehow that knowledge stitched up a few of the tears in my heart.

"Come," he said, holding out a hand, inviting me to place my own palm in his. "Will you walk with me?"

Oh, stars and moon, my heart felt like it was burning. His easy invitation made me smile and bite my lip. "Yes, I just have to put these away." I set the hat back on my head, then picked up the perch.

"Here. Let me take that," Robert insisted, removing the perch from my arms.

"Thank you," I said, disappointed that his hands were now filled and thus I was unable to take the hand he had offered before. I took a breath. No need for me to read too much into his words. We were old friends. Just

because my head and neck seemed to be buzzing with happiness didn't mean I should jump to hasty conclusions about what he might want from me. I stepped forward, leading the way toward the Hatchers' tent. "Have you seen anyone else I might recognize?" I asked as we wound through the crowd.

"Yes, I believe the Aurora Acrobats are here, as well as Bear the Brave and a few others."

I nodded. I had assumed as much. The festival crowd was fluid, so it was never quite the same. And Murrwood being the spot where the northern and southern routes collided made it even more varied than the other villages from year to year. "I thought I saw Madame Celestine."

He grinned. "Did you talk to her?"

I laughed. "No. I have enough reason to worry about my future. I don't need her adding to it."

"I don't mind Celestine. It's Garnet who I try to avoid." He chuckled. "She's always warning me that the devil is after me."

I grinned. Though I didn't personally know Garnet, I knew enough of her to appreciate the old woman's flair for the dramatic. "Are you up to no good, then?"

He winked at me. "Mischief, my dear Elise. It's called mischief."

I smiled at the idea of that distinction being important. Leave it up to a festival rat to tout mischief as a good thing.

"And what of you? Tell me what mischief you've been up to since leaving the wolf."

I stopped abruptly, looking about to see if there was anyone who might recognize that name or me. We were approaching the Hatcher Hats and Costumes tent, and if the day ever came when Hatcher learned who I was, I wanted to be the one to tell him. "Robert," I said once I was convinced that no one was giving our conversation any mind. "You cannot tell anyone that I am acquainted with the wolf wagon or my brothers," I said, my voice gravely serious.

The laughter in his eyes dimmed. "Why not?"

"Because I don't want them to know where I am. I don't want to be connected with them..." I trailed off, flustered that this was something I had to explain. He'd been there the night I left.

"Yes." He shook his head, as though reprimanding himself. "Of course. I'm an idiot. I'll keep my mouth shut from now on. I promise." He mimed

locking his lips.

I let out a quiet breath of relief. "Thank you." I turned and we kept walking, crossing the final distance to the Hatchers' tent. Hatcher stood in the opening, his presence immediately setting me at ease.

"How did you do?" he asked as his eyes jumped from me to Robert and back again as I passed him.

"It was a good day," I answered, then took the perch from Robert so that I could stash it, my shawl, and the nest full of coins in the back corner. When I went to join Robert, I found him and Hatcher looking at each other. "Oh, this is Robert White," I announced, proud that I could introduce someone to Hatcher. "We used to travel together."

Hatcher lifted his chin in greeting, and Robert returned the gesture.

"I go by White now," he said, then turned to me and lowered his voice to a whisper. "For the act and all."

"You'll have to tell me about it," I invited.

"Of course." He swept a hand toward the opening of the tent. "Shall we?" I nodded and stepped up beside him. "Bye, Hatch," I threw over my shoulder.

Maddox

My gut clenched and I tried not to snarl as the hurt curled inside me. Had Elise realized that she had introduced Robert White to me, but had not bothered introducing me to this...former friend? Current friend? Then, not a moment later, she'd called me Hatch. It was her nickname for me. Once I'd started calling her Lisey, she'd been determined to have her own name for me. Calling me Mad wasn't something she would do, and I refused to let her call me Maddie. I still shuddered at the thought. So she'd moved on to my last name, dubbing me Hatcher, or Hatch for short.

And yet, she had not deemed me worthy of introducing to this White.

This was obviously the friend she'd been so keen to find yesterday, yet she hadn't seen fit to call me a friend in his presence.

I shook my head, trying to get rid of the anger that wanted to rise inside me. It hadn't been a slight. I knew Elise well enough to know she'd never

mean to insult me. It was just...an oversight. But that didn't mean it didn't hurt. It also didn't prevent my neck from burning with jealousy.

Not that I had any right to be jealous. I didn't have any claim on Elise—no matter how much I wished it—but the jealousy was there nonetheless. Who was this White, and why was Elise so comfortable in his presence? What history must they have for her to trust him so fully?

It had taken months for her to become comfortable with me. Not the fake comfort that came along with her air of confidence, but true comfort. The kind where we could work around and with one another without her looking at me with fear or suspicion. I knew she trusted me now, but it had been hard earned, and the idea that she just gave it to White was...painful.

Elise

"Tell me about your act," I asked, walking at Robert's side.

He pulled a watch from his pocket and glanced at it before swinging it on its chain. "Well," he said, turning his attention to me, "I've always been good at magic."

"I remember."

"But my parents' act was always a little too serious for me."

A chuckle bubbled in my throat. Robert had always preferred humor. "So are you a jester now?"

"Ah," he said, holding up a finger to make his point. "A jester magician," he said grandly. "And the secret," he said as he tucked the watch away with one hand and pulled a deck of cards out of thin air with the other, "of being a jester magician"—he reached for my ear, and when his hand came back into view, he held a wildflower—"is to entertain the children."

I rolled my eyes. "So I'm a child now?"

"No, but if a child begs to stop and watch..."

"The parents must stay as well," I said, knowing the routine all too well. "I saw you did that very well earlier."

"And the parents have the money." He closed his fist over the wildflower, and when he opened it again, there was a copper sitting on his palm.

My brow rose. "Your sleight of hand is much better than it used to be." He grinned and slid his hand into his pocket. "I've had a bit of time to practice."

"Three years," I mused.

"And what have you done in those three years, Miss Elise?"

"Survived," I said, proud that I could claim as much.

"Is that all?" he asked with clear skepticism. "From what I saw of the Starling, you seem to be thriving."

I fought a blush. "Only by the grace of good people," I said.

"And your own talent."

I conceded with a nod, my stomach curling in pleasure at the compliment.

"Come," he said, grabbing my hand. "Let's watch the sword swallower." He tugged me into a run, and we hurried through the crowd until we could clearly see the man sweeping in front of the crowd with a long sword in his hand before planting his feet, tilting his head back, and feeding the metal blade down his throat.

I'd seen it probably hundreds of times, but it still made me squeamish. Robert leaned close to my ear. "He's quite good."

Though I agreed, I still shut my eyes when the man's assistant came up and pulled the sword from his mouth.

"I think that would take more trust than I have in another human being," Robert commented.

I laughed. "I certainly wouldn't trust myself to do that for anyone."

"Can you imagine if it went wrong?" he asked.

"I'd rather not" was my answer as the assistant set aside the straight blade and then picked up a long blade that was wavy, with three distinct curves in it. She walked along the crowd, presenting it for all to see before bringing it over to the swallower.

"No," I murmured. "No, he wouldn't really..."

Robert grinned. "We festival rats are a different breed, you know that."

I watched, gobsmacked as the man turned so he had his profile to the crowd and then proceeded to push the long, curved blade into his mouth. His neck rose and fell with each curve that pushed past his throat in a sort of trance-inducing, snake-like movement.

When he removed it, I turned my back, feeling even more squeamish than before. Robert burst into applause at my side. "I've never seen anyone swallow that sort of sword before," he shouted in my direction.

"My neither, and I'm not sure I want to again." Still, I was grinning. It was a fantastic act, and I was seeing it with Robert. His easy smile and carefree nature were a breath of fresh air.

The sword swallower wasn't the only act we saw. Robert tugged me from one stall or act to another, and in only a couple of hours, we saw and did more than I usually managed in an entire week. He seemed inexhaustible, and it was easy for his exuberance to rub off on me and make me more optimistic.

As time ticked on, the need to get back to work started making me antsy, but I didn't want to leave Robert. He was familiar, and it had been a long time since I'd had anything familiar. He was also a bright reminder that not everything in my past had been dark. Running from my brothers had meant running from everyone I'd ever known, and until seeing Robert White in that crowd, I hadn't realized just how much I missed some parts of the life I had before.

Fortunately, when I confessed that I needed to get back to work, he seemed sad to see me go and asked me to meet up with him the next day.

As I made dinner and ate alongside Hatcher and Marshall, I thought back on the day and was gratified by how energized I felt. Hatcher put up with my constant restlessness, my need to change costumes and switch from one spot to another, but Robert met my exuberance with his own chaos. There was a sense of freedom in being with him that opened me up and allowed me to breathe. I also knew that his decision to spend time with me wasn't charity. My presence wasn't a burden and so I could be entirely myself, standing at his side as his equal.

Maddox

It was early. We hadn't opened the tent for business yet, so it was no surprise when I entered the tent through the back flap and saw Elise standing there, not quite dressed. Not surprising, but still a shock to my system.

My entrance didn't affect her. She just kept fiddling with the waistband of her skirt, which was not tied. Her bodice was over her shoulders but hadn't been laced at the front. I wanted to growl at the unfairness. I was stuck to the ground, unable to move because she wasn't entirely tied and buttoned into her dress, and yet she was completely unaffected.

When she didn't acknowledge my presence, I thought perhaps she didn't realize I'd come in. Though the abrupt wash of sunlight that my entrance would have caused to appear and then disappear should have been plenty to alert her. She did seem very intent on examining her waistband though, so perhaps—

She let a sound of disgust escape her throat. "Will you help me with this?"

So she did know I was here. She simply wasn't concerned about it. Not that this was new territory, but in the past I'd been able to tell myself that the young, naive part of her personality made her unaware of the effect she had on men, making her impervious to being affected by men.

But once Robert showed up, it was clear that she was well aware of him. Some might even say *smitten*.

"Hatch?"

Her call finally pulled me out of my stupor. I walked forward, bracing myself against the effect of *all of her*. "What's the matter?"

"The matter, Mr. Hatter," she said, throwing a teasing look at me, "is that I think there was a pin left in this skirt." She gestured to the back of her waist. "But it only pokes me when I move a certain way, so I can't find it."

I didn't bother suggesting that she take it off and search the waistband herself, even if that was the practical solution. I had no wish to embarrass her or make her think that I wasn't willing to help. I was willing. There was even an annoying part of me that looked forward to these torturous moments.

I told myself to take courage and tried my best to disconnect my mind from my hands as I searched the top several inches at the back of her skirt, my fingers brushing against her stays.

Focus. Focus. Focus.

Something stabbed my finger. "Ow."

"Are you all right?"

"Fine. I found the pin," I said with bitterness as I pulled it from the fabric. I went around her and put the pin on a table, keeping my face turned firmly away from her. "You're not in costume," I commented.

"No. Robert asked me to walk with him this morning. He'd like to show me his act."

I nodded. I should keep my mouth shut. I shouldn't ask the thing I wanted to ask. But I didn't listen to my own advice. I turned to look at her. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course," she said, glancing up as she tied the laces at the front of her bodice.

"When was it you decided I was a brother to you?"

Her gaze shot to mine, and there it froze. "You're not."

I tried to shrug it off. "It's not that I mind. I'm happy to help if you need it. I was just...curious," I said, trying to make my voice even so I wouldn't reveal my hurt.

The bridge of her nose pinched together in concern. "You think I see you as a brother?"

I nodded. She certainly didn't see me as more than that.

She huffed an angry sigh and looked away before piercing me with a cold stare. "Hatch, if I thought of you like a brother, I would not trust you. I would not confide in you. I would not ask you for favors."

My brow pulled down.

"I've had enough brothers for one lifetime, and I do not wish for any more." She swallowed even as her chin tilted up in defiance.

My world tipped sideways. *Had enough brothers?* I didn't know she'd had any. "I thought you had no family."

She blinked and pulled back. "I don't. Or at least, I wish I didn't. For all intents and purposes, I am alone." She refocused on the task at hand, securing the ties of her skirt.

"But you have brothers? That are still living?"

"Unfortunately." She stared at the ground, her face a haunted mask.

A roiling protectiveness rose up inside me. What would make a young woman abandon the connection and protection of family? We had met when she'd been utterly alone and terrified...had she been terrified of her own family?

"That's not the point," she said suddenly, shaking her head like she could shake away the memories that seemed to torment her. "You accused me of treating you like a brother, and I want to be sure you know that's not how I see you."

I wished I could be fully relieved by her declaration, but I had the sinking suspicion that on this subject, we did not see things the same. I had meant to point out that our relationship was a platonic one. It was my pathetic attempt at hinting that I wanted more from her than just a familial relationship, and it had taken more bravery than I wanted to admit. But that hint had missed its mark entirely because somewhere in Elise's past, her family had distorted what it meant to be family. She was reassuring me that she saw me as a good person, someone to be trusted—unlike her brothers.

"All right" was all I could say. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's fine," she said, brushing the conversation aside, and crouched down to look through a bin of scarves.

I decided to leave it. Though curiosity burned in my gut, I told myself to wait. I told myself that she'd confided in me. It had been a small amount, but it was something. She had brothers, and she did not like them. She may have even fled from them.

She chose a scarf and wrapped it around her head, knotting it at the nape of her neck, hiding all her hair. Then she placed the feathered and veiled hat on her head. My mouth pulled down into a frown as I started to wonder if Elise's desire to obscure her identity had more to do with running from her past than a need to be mysterious as the Starling.

I was watching Robert perform when I saw her. It was the bright-red cloak that caught my eye. I remembered that cloak well. So when I caught sight of it, I didn't think. I just followed after, wandering away from Robert. I examined the girl from behind. A long, blonde braid lay against her spine, and the top of her head didn't reach the shoulder of the man who walked beside her.

It was her, the girl my brother had nicknamed Little Red. I wondered if she still carried the knife I'd seen her wield against my brothers.

She pointed at a booth nearby, and she and the man with her stopped to look at a peddler's wares. When she reached up to touch a large skillet, I noticed the way she shifted something in her arms. Curious, I moved closer until I spied the baby that was cradled against her chest.

A wave of joy and relief washed over me. I'd always tried to trust that this girl had not only gotten safely away from my brothers, but that she'd gone on to live a good life—a life she wanted.

She took her hand away from the skillet and brushed some stray hairs out of her face so she could look up at the man I had to assume was her husband. And the way they looked at one another...

It wasn't that they were grinning at one another like two love-struck fools. They weren't. But there was a quiet peace and contentment that emanated from both of them. It was in the way he held an arm hovering at her back as a protective barrier. It was the way they moved around and with each other. It made me almost breathless.

I reached up and removed my hat, hoping she might see me and recognize me even with the scarf around my head. Perhaps it was that movement, or maybe it was just my staring that caught her attention, but eventually she looked over at me and gave a vague smile before her eyes moved on.

Then her eyes snapped back to me and her jaw went slack. I smiled, glad that she had recognized me. Glad for this moment where we could each see that the other was all right. After that one awful day we'd spent together, trying to keep one another safe, this moment felt like a gift.

I debated stepping closer, trying to say something, but when I heard the call of "Elise" behind me and turned to see Robert looking for me, I knew

this moment would have to be enough. So I turned back to the woman in red. I placed my left hand to my heart and held my right hand toward her, honoring her, before putting that same palm over my heart with the other hand.

It was a sign travelers sometimes used. One of deep gratitude. One that meant a debt was owed that could never be repaid.

She smiled and dipped her head, accepting my thanks, and I turned away just as Robert reached my side.

"You didn't watch my performance," he said, his face a mask of disappointment.

"I saw most of it, but then I saw someone—" I stopped myself, unsure that I wanted to share that moment with anyone else, even Robert.

"That's too bad. I'd say it was one of my best." His voice was teasing, but I could see he was genuinely disappointed.

I put a hand to his arm in apology. "I'm sorry to have missed it. I'm certain you were grand."

"I was," he said with a teasing scowl. "And if there had been just one more person in the audience to cheer for me, it would have all been worth it. But as it is..." He gave a dramatic sigh.

"Hmm. I'm afraid I have to disagree. This performance you're giving me right now is by far the most impressive."

"Come," he said with a chuckle. "Let's find some excitement."

I happily skipped along beside him, eager for the attention and the diversion, but I still had to ask, "Don't you need to work?"

"Work can wait," he insisted. "Adventure first." He took my hand and spun me in a circle.

A laugh escaped my throat. Robert was vivacious. He was constantly making me laugh, constantly finding ways to surprise and delight me. His fingers remained entwined with mine and he swung our joined hands dramatically between us.

When he suddenly pulled me with him as he ran beneath a stilt-walker, my heart jumped into my throat and I tucked my body in to be sure I did not sweep the man's leg out from under him. When we made it to the other side, I smacked Robert's arm. "What if we had toppled him?" I asked.

He shrugged with a grin. "He was fine. They deal with little children running into them all the time."

"Still," I said, pressing a hand to my racing heart. "I don't want to be the cause of someone's injury."

He smiled down on me. "You're right. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." He raised my hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to it.

I had to look away as my insides did a chaotic dance.

We stopped to watch the jugglers, and Robert even convinced me to give it a try. The two men were happy to give us both some pointers and allow us to toss around their pins and rings. Robert was much better at it than I was, but my failures ended with me belly-laughing at my own ineptitude, so I didn't mind.

Next we found a penned area surrounded by people who were slowly filing in. "Is this the pig chase?" I asked, having seen it but never participated.

He nodded. "Are you ready to try to catch ourselves a pig?"

I nodded vigorously and we waited in line until we got inside. All the participants waited on one side of the pen as instructed until a voice shouted, "Are you ready, ladies and gents?"

The crowd cheered.

"All right, then. Catch! That! Pig!"

Two piglets were released in the pen, each dressed in baby clothing. They both started running and squealing, and those of us who had committed to the game gave chase. Since there were two pigs, the crowds ran this way and that, bumping into one another and changing directions. The bonnet of one piglet flew off in the beginning, while the bonnet of the other fell over its eyes, making it even more frantic.

We laughed and ran and lunged when a piglet came close.

The one with the bonnet over its eyes was caught first, but the rest of us continued to chase the other, and it was eventually snagged by a boy of about twelve.

Robert and I stopped running, our breathing made even more difficult by our laughter. I put a hand to my stomach and bent over, trying to catch my breath and grinning at the sight of the boy holding the squealing piglet over his head in victory as several competitors patted him on the back.

Robert was still chuckling as he led me from the pen. "I'm glad you don't mind trying new things," he said.

"I love it," I admitted. "I've never really had the opportunity before, so thank you for that." "Of course," he said.

Around noon, he and I went back to the Hatchers' tent so that I could fix the noon meal for Marshall, Hatcher, and myself. Robert claimed he would find his own luncheon, but I made him sit on a log and eat.

After that, I donned my costume and Robert and I went our separate ways for a time, both determined to put in the work required. I was surprised he'd been so willing to wile away the morning with me. I'd felt guilty over it, but since he'd been the one to lead our romp, and since I'd truly wanted to spend time with him, I set aside my worries.

When the afternoon waned and the sun started its descent, I took up my purse and my perch and threaded my way through the waning crowds. I stopped at a jeweler's stand, putting on a bracelet that had caught my eye. I admired the way it looked against the tanned skin of my wrist.

There was a couple looking at necklaces beside me, and I was surprised when Robert appeared and started doing his sleight-of-hand magic tricks for them. I smiled, making sure to stop and watch him the way I hadn't been able to this morning.

To end his little act, he pulled out his pocket watch and used it and two of the jeweler's pieces to juggle. He threw them higher and higher, eliciting sounds of awe from the spectators. Finally he spun around before snatching all three items from the air in one hand and then holding out his arms in triumph.

The couple laughed and clapped but moved on without giving him a coin. "Better luck next time," I said.

He shrugged it off easily. We both knew that there were far more people who wouldn't give than who would. He held up the bracelets so that the vendor could see him putting them back. "Thank you for the assistance," he said. The woman nodded then looked pointedly at me.

"Oh," I said, remembering I still had a bracelet on my own wrist. "It's lovely," I said, taking it off and returning it to the table.

"Blast," Robert muttered beside me.

"What?" I asked as we moved away from the jeweler.

"My chain," he said as he continued to look down at his pocket watch. "It's broken. Completely. And half of it is missing."

We each looked around where he had been performing, but we couldn't find it in the waning light of the setting sun. "It's got to be here somewhere," I said, confused that it had disappeared so completely.

He groaned in frustration. "It probably flew off somewhere and is trampled into the ground already."

"What will you do? Can you just keep it in your pocket without the chain?"

He shook his head. "That would make me too nervous. If it's not secured to my clothing, it's too likely that it will be lost."

"So you need a new chain?"

He nodded. "Don't know where I'll find one though."

I chewed on my lip, thinking of all the extra costume pieces and bobs that the Hatchers kept on hand. "Come on," I said, picking up the wooden perch that I'd set down to look at the jewelry. "Maybe the Hatchers have something. I've seen some in their shop before, but I'm not sure if they travel with any."

"Shop?" he asked, raising a brow at me. "Are the Hatchers festival mice?"

"Yes, and some of the best people I know," I said, not wanting him to look down on them. "They have a home and shop in Dressle, but they travel during the festival seasons."

As we walked, he became serious. "Tell me, how did you end up with the hatters?"

I was glad he'd asked. I'd been wanting to share more with him but didn't know how to bring it up. "After I left my brothers, I needed a costume. Hatcher helped me. Then I met his little sisters and they decided they wanted to adopt me. I stayed in their home in Dressle over the winter, and after a while"—I shrugged, still marveling over those events—"I had become one of them."

"Except that you're not really one of them, are you?" he said with a grimacing tilt of his mouth.

His words made my heart squeeze with hurt. "What do you mean?" I cherished the idea that the Hatchers had taken me in.

"You're a festival rat, Elise. And the hatters are...they'll never really understand that."

I adjusted the wooden perch in my arms. "Maybe not, but they still care for me."

"Of course they do; you're easy to care for," he said, waving it aside with ease. "But in the end, they'll always have a house and stability, and by the looks of their operation—more money than you or I are ever going to see."

"I make my own way," I said, not wanting him to think I was living off of their charity, even if it sometimes felt that way.

"I'm sure you do. That's what you were raised for. That's my point. All of this"—he gestured to the colorful tents and stalls, the costumes and flowing drink—"is what you know. It's where you belong. And no matter how many festivals the hatters might travel to, they won't ever really fit in with those of us whose home is on wheels—or on the ground."

I frowned, unsure what I disliked more, his characterization of me and the Hatchers, or the fact that it was true.

"We know how to survive," he continued. "That's all we've ever done, and it's all we'll ever do. We'll never know what it's like to take in and support a complete stranger."

I bristled. "I told you, they don't support me."

His smile was soft. "I'm really not challenging your ability to care for yourself, Elise." He reached over and tapped the brim of my hat. "I know how strong you are. Do you?"

I breathed in the compliment and let it warm me from inside. I knew he had a point. I could see all too well the difference between the Hatchers and myself, and there were things that Robert could understand about my life and the way I thought that Dorothy, Kat, Hatcher, and Marshall...they never could.

Maddox

Even as I helped customers, I kept looking through the crowd, waiting for Elise to return. When the sun started to set, I expected her to return, hoping she wouldn't bring Robert with her this time. Having Elise invite him to join us for lunch had been bad enough. I didn't know if I could stomach more of him. Seeing them together was maddening—and it wasn't just because of the jealousy. It was the way she seemed to form herself around him, catering to his desires and wishes, setting aside her own opinions and wants.

I had just sent off a customer with a beaded sash and was sitting back at my table when I saw them—together again. They were still a ways off, too far away for me to hear the conversation they were having. Elise carried her perch while Robert strolled along, unencumbered. As they conversed, he reached over to touch the hat I had made for her and I watched as her whole body seemed to respond to him, like his words and that gesture had made her fall for him in a single instant. Oh, how I hated it.

I dropped my eyes as they came close enough for me to hear.

"You and I would make a formidable pair," Robert said as they approached.

"Pardon?" she asked. She was likely wondering the same thing I was. *A pair of what?* There were so many options when thinking of pairs. Some exciting, some mundane.

"Hello, Hatch," Elise said with her usual sweetness as they passed by my work table.

I looked up and gave her a smile but remained silent.

"Performing together," Robert answered.

"And what would our act be?" she asked, opening and closing a set of drawers where I kept small odds and ends. Apparently, Elise hadn't told him that not only did she already perform with others, but that she was a brilliant act in her own right and didn't need him to make her better.

"We could be a magical, singing duo," Robert declared with a pomposity that grated my nerves. "Can't you imagine?" he asked, lifting his arms in grand fashion. "The great Robert White," he said sweeping into a bow. "And his wonderfully talented partner," he continued, gesturing to Elise with a flourish, "the esteemed Elise W—"

"Robert." Elise's eyes and voice snapped.

White froze for a moment and then dropped his hand with a sigh. He stepped closer to Elise, murmuring barely loud enough that I was able to overhear. "Your last name is not something to be ashamed of."

Her head tilted and her brow furrowed as she looked up at him. "Yes, it is." Her quiet assertion made me proud of her and angry at him. For someone who knew Elise, White seemed to be terrible at reading her mood.

He put up his hands in surrender, but it was a condescending gesture that made my lip curl.

Elise went back to looking through the drawers until she found a linked chain and pulled it out. "Here," she said, holding it out to him. "If you take it to Hatcher, he'll attach it for you."

He took it from her and studied it. "And what if I can't afford it?" he asked.

She shook her head and then dropped her gaze. "It's a gift from me."

"Elise, I can't let you give me such a thing—"

"Please," she interrupted him. "Please let me do this."

To his credit, he looked unsure for at least a moment. "Very well. Thank you." He pulled his watch from his pocket. "I'll have it affixed immediately."

"I'll join you in a moment," she said, and as soon as his back was turned to her, she looked over at me and mouthed the words, *I'll pay for it*.

A grim smile crossed my lips as I watched her retreat to the back corner of the tent, likely intent on switching outfits.

I turned away, fixing my eyes on my work. Robert wandered up next to the table, but I ignored him until he spoke up.

"Elise said you might attach this watch and chain for me."

I looked up, resisted the urge to sneer at him, and took the watch and chain from his hands instead. I took out a couple of tools from a box and pulled my candle closer. I should remain silent. I should, but the question wouldn't leave off. "You know her last name?" I said as I manipulated one of the links in the chain.

"Of course."

My stomach dropped. *Of course*, he'd said. As though it were completely natural for this puffed-up pretender to know something as important as Elise's last name when I didn't.

Why didn't I know it? Why had I never asked?

I looked at Robert, tempted to ask him what her last name was right there and then, but I stopped myself. I didn't just want to know things about Elise. I wanted her to confide them in me. I wanted the intimacy of knowing she trusted me with everything, and that I'd earned that trust.

If only she would.

Robert's eyebrow rose in smug curiosity. "How long have you known her?"

I focused back on his cursed chain. "Three years."

He sucked at his teeth, and when I glanced up at him, he looked away, smirking. "And she's never told you her last name?" He looked pleased at that bit of information.

My hand fisted around his watch. "It never came up."

The way his mouth curled, I could tell he was only barely holding back a laugh. "Sure it didn't. Or perhaps Elise just likes to keep her secrets."

I chose to glare down at the chain instead of at him. "Or perhaps she wants to forget her old life."

I heard him suck in a breath, but he didn't say anything, and a moment later, Elise bounced up beside me. "Is it going to work?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, wishing she didn't sound as if she was doubting my abilities. I quickly hooked the link around the loop of the watch and squeezed it shut with my tools. "Here." I tossed it to White and he barely caught it. I couldn't remember a time when I'd treated a customer so poorly, but then again, White *wasn't* a customer. He was a man willing to take gifts from a girl who was in no position to throw money away.

"Will that do?" Elise asked, sounding worried that somehow he would reject the gift she'd freely given.

"It will do very well," he said, smiling down at her. Then he looked down at the watch. "And speaking of time, I must be off." He took Elise's hand and pressed a quick kiss to the back of it.

I had to look away, fixing my eyes on the wooden surface of my work table with such intensity that my vision blurred.

"Thank you for a lovely day," he said.

I heard her move even closer to him. "I'll see you tomorrow?" she asked him, and her voice sounded so vulnerable and unsure that it made me dislike him even more.

"Of course," he said, and I heard him walk away.

I didn't say anything, choosing instead to stand so I could close the flaps of the tent since any revelers were either gone or too lost in drink to want to purchase anything but more drink. Elise helped me, then continued to tidy even after I'd sat back at my work table. She'd changed out of her costume and looked like her usual self, comfortable.

Eventually, she jumped up onto the stool beside me and reached over to steal a biscuit from my plate. Not that I could complain. She'd made them, after all.

Then she dropped a copper on the table next to me. "That's for Robert's chain."

I hesitated, wanting to throw the money back at her and demand to know why she was gifting anything to that selfish, pompous—

I mentally sighed and then picked up the copper. If I didn't accept it, that would mean I had allowed her to give something of my father's away to her new...companion. And I could stomach that idea even less than the idea of Elise thinking she was indebted to me.

"I thought he liked to be called White," I said, because I had to say *something*, and saying *"your friend is a pig"* didn't seem like the right thing.

She shrugged. "I've always known him as Robert. I can't change that now." She put a bite of biscuit in her mouth.

"Elise?"

"Hmm?" She looked up, one fingertip still in her mouth as she licked the preserves from it.

"Don't you think it's strange that you've never told me your last name?" She froze. Everything about her went still and tense as she stared at me. Then I watched as she unlocked her limbs one by one before returning her

attention to the table's surface. "What does it matter?"

I waited for her to look up at me again, and when she did, I smiled just a little, hoping to convey compassion but also remind her that I was no fool. "It is strange."

She squirmed a little. "My last name is"—she struggled for words—"of no consequence."

"Then why keep it such a secret?"

"I don't *like* my last name," she stated.

My mind churned over what reasons she might have. She'd confessed to having brothers that weren't worth mentioning, but her last name? I just had to ask, "Why?"

"Because I don't."

"Why?" I pressed, frustrated that she would push back on something so simple. It was a name, not a story.

"Because it's not a good name," she yelled.

I pulled back in surprise. Fierce Elise was something I rarely saw.

"It doesn't represent love or loyalty or honor. It's not who I want to be or what I want to be known by," she declared with conviction.

I chewed on my lip for a moment. "Very well." I could understand that. "But why not tell *me*?"

"Why do you need to know?" Her face was sad and frustrated.

I studied her. Why *did* I need to know? "Because it's a part of you. It might be a part that you don't like, but it *is* a part of you, and it clearly still affects you," I said, looking at the way she pursed her lips and bunched her forehead. "I want to know about it. I want to know...you."

"You do know me," she said, slapping her hand against the surface of the table.

"Do I?" I asked, my voice raised. "I thought I knew you quite well, but then this White comes around, and he doesn't have to earn your trust over *years*, and he already knows your name, and probably much more." I truly hoped I wasn't sounding like a whiny fool. "And I don't understand why I haven't earned that trust."

She put her elbows on my work table and cradled her head in her hands for a moment before turning to silently study me. "I suppose there is some level of trust between Robert and me. Shared experience does that. He knew me when I was younger. He watched...my life. He saw the way I lived." Her vague words held such gravity that I worried about all the things

she wasn't saying. "My name and my past is not a secret from him because he witnessed it. I didn't have a choice in him knowing. But I have a choice now, and I like to think that I have some control over the stories I want to share and those that I don't."

"Was your life so terrible?" I asked with trepidation. I knew that the weeks leading up to our first meeting had been challenging. She'd been starving with nowhere to go. But I always assumed that was a result of having just lost the last of her family, or, I now realized, perhaps running away from her family.

She didn't answer for quite a while. But she didn't walk away either. She continued to study me and I calmly held her gaze, wondering what it was she was looking for in me. Finally, when the silence became almost too much to bear, she spoke again.

"My name is Elise Wolfe."

I caught the intuitive reply of "Nice to meet you, Miss Wolfe" in my throat before it could escape. Though it would have been the natural response, it was clear that she wished to leave that name behind. So I would put it away in the box of secrets she'd shared with me, and perhaps it would help me know her better. "Thank you for telling me that," I said, needing her to know that I valued the trust she put in me.

She swallowed and nodded. "I still don't understand why it was important."

I reached out. I couldn't help myself. The vulnerability pulsing through her expression and posture called out to me, making me ache to soothe it. Though I wanted to hook my hand around the back of her neck and pull her into my chest, I contented myself with simply brushing her cheek with my thumb. "Every piece of you is important to me." The vulnerability of my own words startled me, and I gave a shrug, trying to push aside the weight of what I had just said. Every piece of her *was* important to me. Her eyes, her hair, her heart, her smile, her small feet, the curve of her neck and the sway of her back.

She blinked up at me, and the way she stared, her eyes wide and her lips slightly parted, made me ache to close the distance between us.

Instead, I swallowed and dropped my hand. "Why don't you like your name?"

Her wide eyes blinked several times with an unsettling fragility. "It's the name of my family—my brothers."

The haunted look in her eyes made me want to wrap her up and keep her safe, or find a weapon and hunt down her brothers. "Laws, Elise. What did they do to you?"

She looked away, her chin pulling up as she tried not to cry. "They were bigger and stronger, and it didn't matter if I disagreed. I never won an argument because their fists were faster than mine were." She sniffed and looked back at me. "And they were more willing to use them."

My heart pounded so furiously that I could almost hear it. I clenched my fists, locking in my anger so it would not spill over onto her.

Elise

I couldn't believe I'd said it. Was I really going to tell Hatcher my story? Part of me thrashed against the idea, but the larger part of me desperately wanted to know if he would hear my story and still see me for me.

I watched him swallow before he asked, "Your parents were already gone?"

I nodded.

He paused, choosing his words with care. "You said you were seven when your father died, but what about your mother?" he asked, leaning in, his soft, compassionate eyes inviting me to confide in him. "When did she die?"

I let out a small puff of bitter laughter. "I'm not sure she did." Concern and confusion chased across his face. "What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "She'd been sick. It had been more than three years since my father died, and the burden on my brothers was...great. They didn't think my mother did enough. She cared for me. She cooked and cleaned, but she'd never been a performer, so it was left to my brothers to earn the money. So on the few occasions when she got sick, they had no patience for it." I swallowed, hating the memories that scraped against my mind, digging in and making it bleed. Memories of my brothers yelling at her, railing against her for her weakness. Looking back, I was sure that their anger had lengthened her ailments even more. "That last time..." I said, rubbing at the side of my neck then pressing the back of my fingers to my mouth before continuing, "I'd been caring for her, and she said something about how we'd be better off without her. I brushed it off, she had a fever after all, but she kept saying it, over and over. I fell asleep, worried that she

really believed it. I certainly didn't believe it. I was terrified of living my life without her. And my fears were justified." I tear streaked down my cheek.

"What happened?"

I sniffed. "She was gone when I woke up."

"Gone?"

"Gone. No longer there. The bed was empty. At first I thought that was a good thing. If she could walk, then surely she was feeling better, but she wasn't out tending to the fire." Numbness washed over me as I recalled that morning. "She wasn't down at the stream washing clothing. She wasn't... anywhere. When I asked my brothers, all they would say was that she'd left. *She left us.* They said it over and over. She left us. They called her weak and uncaring. But I didn't believe them. I couldn't believe them. They wanted to pack up the wagon and leave, but I refused. I searched the woods for hours, screaming her name, apologizing and begging her to come back."

"What were you apologizing for?"

I shrugged. "All the things a child thinks they need to say sorry for. I thought I hadn't done enough, either to help or to care for her. Maybe I was the reason she was dissatisfied with her life. Maybe I was to blame."

"You weren't."

"I know that now." At least I wanted to know it, to believe it. "But I didn't know it then."

"So it was just you and your brothers?"

I chewed the inside of my lip as I nodded. "With my mother gone, they were determined to make me a performer. You see, my mother hadn't wanted that life for me. She always said it was too easy for people to mistake selling an act for selling yourself."

I could see by the look in his eyes that he was imagining all the horrible things I might have endured, so I took pity on him and finished the story.

"Luckily, that's not what they had in mind. At least...I never thought it would come to that." I breathed deep through my nose, trying to find my composure. "That's what finally made me leave," I explained, my voice tight and high with my determination to keep it together, shoving the tears down and forcing my words forward. "You see, my brothers were mean and manipulative. They were happy to convince me with their fists and their threats that they were always right. But they were also fiercely protective of me." It was important that he know this. Important that he understand the

loyalty I'd felt for them. "They never let anyone else touch me. They wouldn't put up with people jeering or taunting me. They scared off anyone who seemed too interested. It's why I never considered leaving. Their protection was worth something. It was worth everything. It was a guarantee that I could walk through the world unharmed except by my brothers. And I could handle that," I said, nodding my head, putting on the mask of tough resilience that had served me for so long. "I could take a beating and still carry on the next day. And when I did well—when my performance was good and the audience was generous, they were grateful." Those moments had been everything to me. When they were kind and appreciative instead of cold and hard. "They congratulated and cheered me. It was those times when we really did feel like a family. Despite my father's death, despite my mother being...somewhere...or nowhere. At least we could count on each other, right?"

His face reflected the disappointment that he felt coming. We both knew this story wasn't going to have a happy ending.

"I gave them everything," I said, the words pouring out of me hard to stop now that I'd started. "My loyalty. My time and talents. I cooked for them and cleaned up after them. I danced and performed and gathered the coins that supported us. I didn't stop them when they stole from the rich dodos who pranced about the festivals. We had plenty of money. Our act was good—the best," I declared with an odd mixture of pride and fierce anger. "And what we didn't gather in donations, they stole out of the pockets of those who could afford it, and that was fine. Fine enough that I didn't argue over it." I blinked my burning eyes. Perhaps I should have protested. Perhaps my mother would have wanted me to stand up for what was right. "But then they got more bold, less principled, if they ever were in the first place, and they started stealing from everyone. They conned desperate people," I admitted, my throat burning with anger. "They sold miracle cures to women whose babies were nearly dead in their arms and fathers whose children had been born blind. Anything for a coin. It was all a great joke to them, and I hated it."

"You couldn't do anything." He said it as a statement, not a question, and it was a relief to know that he had some comprehension of what my position had been.

"I tried. I started to protest, but they ignored me or laughed at me."

"So then what made you leave?"

I pressed my fingers to my lips and sniffed. "It started out as the stupidest thing. They conned an old man out of a bowl." My face twisted in incredulity. "We didn't need it. It wasn't worth much, but they found so much pleasure in cheating people that they stole a silly painted bowl." I was still incredulous over that decision. It had been risky and unnecessary. "I loudly argued with them about it. I even jumped from the wagon. I was so tired of watching them cause misery for their own entertainment." Of course they hadn't listened to my protests. The strike of Daggon's hand had been swift. I was on the ground with a bloody face before I knew what was happening. "I insisted they go back and return it, but..."

"They wouldn't go back."

I shook my head. "And then a girl came by. She was defending me, trying to be brave, like me. She failed, like me." I stood and turned away for a moment, wiping at my face, then turned back, ready to have the story done with. "They took her. Threatened to hurt me if she didn't cooperate and hurt her if I didn't cooperate." All my residual anger bubbled up. "It was the first time I really stood up to my brothers, over something as silly as a bowl, and it did *no good*. Not only that, but it was my delay that allowed that girl to be taken," I said as I jabbed a finger into my chest. "My protests didn't make a difference," I spat as all my helplessness bubbled to the surface, boiled in pain and anger. "My indignation and righteous arguments didn't save her."

His chest rose and fell with bigger swells as he reacted to the news of my mistreatment. "What did they do with you? With her?"

"They tried to sell her." The words were bitter as they left my mouth—as I watched blood drain from Hatcher's face. "My brothers, who had been so protective of me, so determined—I thought—to keep me from that pain and humiliation at least. They didn't even pause before deciding that this girl could fetch a price for them." The aching in my throat and chest increased as I continued to hold my tears and tell my story. "They even found a man willing to make the purchase. The only reason the transaction wasn't made was because she was...fierce. Strong. Saints above, she ended up saving me." How grateful I was to have seen her. Perhaps that was why I could speak of it. Because I knew that the girl in the scarlet cloak was happy and healthy and had created a beautiful family.

I sniffed again but kept talking, wanting to get it all out. "Seeing her being paraded about, put up for sale, it shattered my tenuous belief in my brothers. I had been sure that there was a line they would not cross." The tears that had been threatening would not be held back any longer, and they streaked down my face. "I'd been sure that I would always be safe from others if they were on my side. Then, at the first opportunity, they took a girl who looked to be *my age*," I said, my broken voice rising as I pressed both hands over my heart. "They tied her up in our wagon and they found a man willing to pay for her. And when that didn't work out, they found another buyer. My attempts to stand up to them and save her were useless. It was *her* friends that found her and saved her. It was *she* who saved me. When all was said and done, the only reason I was even able to walk away was because she and her friends had my brothers distracted. So I took my chance, and I stole from my brothers, and I snuck away like a *coward*. And then—"

"Don't." Hatcher stood abruptly.

That one harsh word from Hatcher's mouth startled me into silence.

"Don't call yourself a coward," he said, his eyes blazing. "I think you may very well be the least cowardly person I know." He stepped closer, his hand reaching up the way it had before. But instead of just skimming my cheek, he pressed his hand to the back of my neck and gently pulled me to his chest.

I'd hugged Hatcher plenty of times. He was my best friend. But this was...so different. The way he held me like I was fragile, like he would wrap me in all his strength and take care of me, was exactly what I needed.

More tears stung my eyes and I couldn't stop the sobs that rose up. I clung to his back, letting him hold me up. After a time, my gratitude welled up so big and full that I couldn't keep it in anymore. "Thank you, Hatcher," I said between sniffs. "I don't think you'll ever be able to understand what your friendship means to me." After giving and giving to my brothers until I was empty and wrung out, being accepted and appreciated by Hatcher and his entire family was wonderful and curious and still felt unreal most of the time. And it certainly felt fleeting, as if it couldn't possibly last.

But for this moment, I would soak in his strength and try to believe that it might always be this way.

Maddox

I woke the next morning but remained in my bedroll, marveling over the newfound connection I felt with Elise. She had told me her story. She'd confided in me, telling me about the worst days of her life. And then she'd let me comfort her, sobbing into my arms, and the *rightness* of that... Taking care of her had felt like the way it should always be.

At least for me.

I dragged my hand down my face. I loved her so much, in so many ways, and she had no idea.

Absolutely maddening.

When I finally got up to prepare for the day, I passed by Elise where she crouched by the fire. She looked up and gave me a soft, timid smile. She'd entrusted me with a fragile part of herself, which I knew had been difficult for her. I smiled in return, then squeezed her shoulder as I passed by, trying to communicate without words that I understood, and that I would be careful with her confidences.

As the day progressed, moving from morning and into late afternoon, I was grateful that White hadn't come around today. Yet.

It had been a more normal day, with Elise coming in and out, switching costumes when the mood struck her. I loved that she had options. I loved that I'd made all of them.

I was with a young lady who wished for a cape with gold embellishments, showing her her options, when White wandered in.

"Is Elise here?" he asked.

I tossed my head in the direction of the back corner. "She's changing." He nodded and stepped away, feigning interest in a table stacked with belts, sashes and scarves.

The young lady squealed over a cape with golden leaves embroidered along the hem and happily handed over a piece of silver for it, hugging it to her chest as she hurried away.

I smiled until White's voice reminded me that he was here.

"You've certainly provided Elise with plenty of costumes."

I swallowed my annoyance and did my best to speak calmly. "And she insists on paying for every one," I said, knowing how important that was to her.

"And you let her?" he asked.

I snorted a laugh. "I do now. I fought that fight enough times to know I wasn't going to win."

White just grunted a response and turned to scan my wares. "She's certainly changed since I knew her."

I burned with curiosity, wondering what Elise had been like when she'd been living day in and day out with brothers who abused her. "You knew her when she was with her brothers?" I asked, my eyes darting back toward the changing corner, hoping she'd take even longer so that White might answer my question.

He nodded, pulling out his watch to look at the time. "Those men had a tough time rearranging their act when she left."

"Serves them right," I muttered.

"What do you mean?" he asked, tucking the watch away.

"She told me how they treated her." Which made me wonder why White—if he was such a good friend—had not done something about it.

He shrugged. "They were two brothers trying to take care of a younger sister. It was hard for all of them."

I was taken aback. The stories Elise had told me didn't make it seem like her brothers had tried their best. "How well did you two know each other?"

"We traveled the same route for both the spring and autumn festivals, so we were around each other for at least six months out of the year. Her brothers kept her pretty close, but we were friends." White looked over his shoulder toward where Elise was behind the curtain. "We're going to be late," he said as he pulled the pocket watch out again and swung it carelessly by the chain Elise had gifted him.

The devil inside me wanted him to set that watch down on my work table, where I might accidentally stab it with my scissors. It was petty of me, but it would be no less than he deserved. He was always in such a

hurry, rushing Elise from one event to another, never taking the time to let her be. My jealousy grew even more and I occupied myself with daydreams of opening up White's ridiculous watch and smearing jam inside of it. If he weren't so obsessed with keeping his frantic pace, he might have the time to realize how much hurt Elise still carried with her because of her brothers. He might even find the time to *care* about it.

I crossed my arms over my chest, allowing my rolled-up sleeves to pull over my arms. "So you don't think that her brothers treated her unfairly?"

He looked at me, actually looked at me long and hard for the first time since I'd met him. Then he let out a distinctly long-suffering sigh. "I know you travel some of the year, but you've also got a permanent home. You make your money off of all the festival rats who have no choice but to put on something shiny in the hopes that we can sell a story or a trick and make enough to pay for our next meal." His nose wrinkled in what could only be called a snarl. "You don't know the kind of life that Elise lived, that I've lived, that her brothers had to live. It's a hard life. And a hard life makes hard people."

"That sounds like an excuse," I challenged.

He laughed. "An excuse? For what?"

"For the fact that you ignore the suffering you see around you."

He did his best to look cool and unaffected. "It's not that I ignore it. It's that I'm too busy trying to fend off my own suffering."

I scoffed openly. "That may have been the case years ago, but I've been watching you and the way you live. Your life may have been one of suffering before, but it certainly isn't now." I leaned back, looking over him with a cool and calculated air. "You're trying hard to look down on me for not being familiar with the harsh realities of life, and yet I can tell from the clothing on your back that you are better off than nearly every other festival rat I've seen." I raised my eyebrows, daring him to contradict me. "Those materials do not come cheap, and that infernal watch looks an awful lot like something a dandy would own. You're not a scruffy rat anymore, White. If anything, you're a fluffy little rabbit."

He glared at me, his nostrils flared as he curled his lips into a mockery of a smile. "Think what you will. Fortunately for me"—he stepped into my space—"you're not the person in this tent whose favor I wish to win."

"Hatcher!" Elise called from the back of the tent.

I stepped away from White, giving him a raise of my brow to drive home the point that Elise had called for *me*, and I was more than ready to be of assistance. I also viciously hoped that she was tangled in her costume and would ask for my help. Let White make what he would of that. I knew Elise saw me only as a friend, but I was positive that the idea of me helping her with her clothing would drive him absolutely mad. "What is it, Elise?" I asked as I went to the back of the tent.

A rustling to my left made me turn. She was elbow-deep in a trunk of accessories, already dressed.

"I was hoping to borrow a ribbon for my hair, but I can't find one that matches."

I glanced over her clothing, noting the shades of light blue in her dress, and went to a small trunk, opening it and finding exactly what I knew I would. "Here," I said, holding up the ribbon that would perfectly complement her clothing.

She pushed to her feet and put her hands to her hips, her lips pressing hard to try to keep her smile in, but it was no good. "You are a wonder."

"Yes, my powers of organization are unparalleled," I joked.

She pulled her hair over one shoulder and started braiding the flaxen strands as she looked to the front of the tent. "Is Robert here?" "Yes."

She flinched. "I'm taking longer than I'd hoped. I told him I would be ready when he got here."

Did she really think that White would just leave without telling her? What kind of an inconsiderate dodo was he? "I'm certain he'll wait for you."

"Yes, but I don't want to make him late. I think this competition is his favorite, and he won't want to miss any of it."

I scowled at that. Elise had worked a full day. Usually she preferred to sit around the fire, take time to make and eat dinner and just talk in the evenings. Rushing off to see one of the competitions...well, it wasn't her idea.

Elise reached the end of her braid and secured it with a leather cord. Then she threaded the ribbon between her hair and her neck before tying it at the top of her head. "How do I look?"

"Just as beautiful as always."

"Good," she said with a pleased smile, then kissed me on the cheek and ran off with White.

I stood there, swallowing and trying to keep all my envy firmly tucked away.

And failing spectacularly.

Elise

The sword competition had been well fought, and I loved cheering alongside Robert. When it was over, he deliberately took my hand, looking down at me as he threaded his fingers through mine. I bit my lip as we started to amble slowly away from the thinning crowd.

"Can I ask you something?" he inquired after a moment.

"Of course."

"Why are you so content to spend time with me?"

I looked up at him, surprised that he would ask such a thing. "Should I not be?"

"I'm grateful you are, but I just wonder what I am to you. Am I just the next adventure? Am I an old friend that you're obligated to be nice to?"

I was shocked at the uncertainty that wove its way through his words. Since we'd reunited, Robert had seemed the epitome of confidence. I'd assumed I was the only one who felt unsteady in our friendship, but seeing his vulnerability did something to my heart. Something good.

I shook my head. "It's not obligation," I assured him.

"Then what is it?"

"You mean, aside from the fact that I've always liked you as a person?" He grinned. "Yes, besides that."

How could I explain it? I took a breath and did my best to find the words. "I don't owe you anything."

His brow scrunched, not understanding.

I kept talking, finding my way through the words. "I adore the Hatchers. They are my family now—they are. But...in reality, I am just a stranger they took in, and there's always this thought in the back of my head that they'll wake up one of these days"—I took a stuttering breath— "and realize how much they've given me, and how little I've been able to give in return." I swallowed hard. It was the first time I'd voiced those fears out

loud. In fact, it was the first time that I'd truly been able to put words and sentences to that niggling fear that I'd buried deep.

"Surely they don't see you that way," he said. "As you've told me before, you take care of yourself."

"I do," I assured him. "Because I'm afraid of what I'll lose if I were to truly become a burden."

A bit of anger crossed his face, almost like he was indignant on my behalf. "You don't need them. You've proven you can take care of yourself."

"In a way, yes. I can take care of my basic needs. I can survive...but being with them fills something." I looked at him, hoping to make him understand. "Don't you miss your family?"

"Yes, but...I don't mind being on my own."

"What if you dreaded going back to your family? What if they weren't a safe place to go back to?"

His brow furrowed. "That would be...difficult."

"Yes," I assured him. "So then, wouldn't you want to find people who gave you that safety? Someone you could rely on besides yourself?"

"Hmm," he considered.

"There's a comfort and safety I've found with the Hatchers, and I value it, but eventually...I'll have to move on."

We walked along in comfortable silence for several moments before he spoke again. "You mean, eventually...you will meet someone, and *he* will become your family." He looked over at me. "Right?"

His words were vague, but their meaning blasted through me like a horn. They were exactly what I had been thinking, but if he was saying them, did that mean...did *he* wish to be that family? Did he see that sort of potential future for us? I tamped down that thought. He hadn't said any such thing. He wasn't volunteering, he was just stating the facts. I would need to marry someday soon, and that man would become my family.

"Are you ready for that adventure?" he asked. "Would you want to branch out and do things differently if you found someone who wasn't content to follow the festival route like everyone else?"

What answer should I give? What did he want to hear? Was he talking about himself or just talking in generalities? My mind raced until I realized that all I could be was honest. As much as I wanted to please Robert, honesty was more important. So I took a breath. "I really don't know. I've

put so much effort into creating a stable life for myself, and a big part of that is the routine and predictability of these festivals. Plus, this is all I've ever known."

"And you've made a name for yourself." He sounded proud, which bolstered my confidence.

"Yes, I have. Don't get me wrong, I love the freedom of this life just as much as the predictability. And a part of me does want to be more adventurous."

He grinned. "I've noticed. There aren't many people who can keep up with my need for change, but you've done an admirable job."

I laughed a little. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"As you should. This world is vast and exciting and wide open to anyone willing to venture into it. I want to see more of it, feel more of it, experience more of it. And at some point..." He glanced down at me and then away. "At some point, I hope to find someone who wants those same things."

My stomach clenched and my heart jumped into my throat. He wouldn't say those things if he didn't believe I could be that person, would he? He was holding my hand while he said them; surely that meant something.

A warm swell of hope blossomed in my chest and I closed my eyes, breathing in the evening air and the possibility of *someday* that Robert had just laid at my feet. The idea of seeing more of the wide-open world was beautiful and appealing, not only for the adventure, but also for the distance it would give me from my brothers. If I were to choose a life outside the festival world, perhaps I could finally lay down the fear that constantly bubbled under the surface.

Elise

It was the last full day of the Murrwood festival, and I'd planned to spend at least a portion of it with Robert, the way we had every day this week. I wanted to talk more about what he wanted and what I wanted. If we wanted the same thing, and if that thing was each other...

But Robert was gone.

I'd walked around the festival multiple times looking for him before I started asking if anyone had seen him. The answer was no, over and over again, until I spoke with the smithy's apprentice.

"Saw him this morning," he said as he pounded the red-hot metal with his hammer.

I was relieved that someone had seen him. "Where was he?"

He tipped his head to the east. "Headed that way. I'd only just arrived to get the fires going when he came by. Had a full pack on his back."

A shot of alarm ran through me. "Did he say where he was going?"

"Stormbrook," he said, moving the metal back to the forge. "Said Dressle was worn out and he wanted to try his hand at something new."

"But the Stormbrook festival isn't for almost two weeks."

"That's what I told him, but he just said he didn't need a festival to sell his magic."

"Oh," I said, more confused than anything. "Thank you." I turned to go and left him to his hammer.

I walked back toward camp with a scowl on my face and my arms folded tightly across my chest. Had the time he and I spent together meant so little to him? Did I not deserve a little warning of his departure, or even a wave goodbye? Last night he'd talked about a future, about adventure.

As I walked along the stream that skirted the festival grounds, I tried not to be mad. However, I couldn't help coming to the conclusion that his actions were horribly insensitive, and I didn't like thinking that Robert was insensitive. He and I had had such a lovely time together. The entire week, he'd been attentive, caring, and complimentary. He'd held my hand and told me I was capable. He'd wanted to know why I was willing to spend time with him, as though *he* were the one unworthy of *my* attention.

And then he just left.

When I came within sight of the Hatchers' tent, I couldn't bring myself to go back there. Instead I sat down on the bank of the stream and stared at the rocks under the clear surface of the water. I didn't want to go back to Hatcher and Marshall pouting, especially when I suspected that Hatcher didn't like Robert much. If I went back and told him how deeply Robert had hurt my feelings, I was certain Hatcher would like him even less.

So I tried to breathe through my hurt. I tried to see things from Robert's point of view. The smithy had said Robert wanted to try something new, which wasn't surprising. Robert couldn't sit still; he was always running to the next activity or the next idea. Maybe that was why he left. Maybe when I'd told him that I wasn't sure I wanted a life outside of my routine, he'd decided that I couldn't be the person he needed. Did he believe I was too staid and boring for him now?

What a depressing thought.

I looked across the stream and saw a very pretty spray of bright purple flowers climbing the hill that rose on the other side. Deciding it was up to me to improve my mood, I decided to go after them and perhaps even weave them into a circlet for my hair. I stood, brushing at the back of my skirts before lifting the hem so that I could step out onto an obliging stone in the middle of the stream that would allow me to cross easily.

Or so I thought.

The stone was not stable. The moment my foot landed on it, it shifted and tilted to the side. I had to step off into the water before falling onto my back. I rolled to my hands and knees and tried to climb to my feet, but I'd rolled my ankle, and when I put weight on my right foot, a sharp pain shot up my leg. So I sat down and scooted myself onto shore, my hem sopping.

I growled through my clenched teeth and lay back on the grassy bank, cursing under my breath and pounding a fist into the ground. *Why did Robert leave?* Even if he didn't care for me as anything more than a friend,

I truly believed he cared *somewhat*. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe he didn't care. Maybe no one cared.

At that thought, my eyes filled with tears and I covered my face with my hands.

Maddox

It wasn't like Elise to be gone so long, especially if she wasn't singing. I knew she wasn't singing, because all of her costume pieces and her wooden perch were safely tucked away at the back of the tent. I'd checked. She'd left without explanation just after breakfast, which I assumed meant she was with Robert, but now that the noon hour had passed, I'd decided to track her down. Elise was usually careful not to cause us any worry, and she never missed meals. She seemed to believe she owed us that because the thought of being a nuisance and a burden weighed heavily on her. She wasn't a burden, but it didn't matter how many times I told her that—she never believed me.

After doing a circle around the festival and not seeing her, I decided to walk along the stream. She'd mentioned her fondness for it the other day.

Nearly as soon as the stream came into view, I spotted her sitting on the bank, looking forlorn. I was about to call out to her when she stood and leapt across the water.

Or tried to.

She slipped and fell backward, then crawled out of the water...and threw a tantrum. She cursed and flailed and looked so much like Didi had when she was three that I nearly laughed out loud.

But then she laid back, quiet and still, and I didn't feel like laughing anymore. My presence suddenly seemed like an intrusion, and I thought perhaps I should just turn around and go back to work. Then she covered her eyes and took a stuttering breath, and I couldn't stay away.

I approached slowly, being sure to make enough noise that she would be aware of my presence without being startled. She kept her hands over her eyes until I sat in the tall grass beside her and asked, "Did you get hurt?"

"Yes," she said, and it came out almost as a wail as she tried to hide her crying.

I swallowed. The things her crying did to me...

"What hurts?"

"My ankle," she said as she turned onto her side and curled into a ball.

This was clearly about more than her ankle. Elise did not weep over a turned ankle, yet here she was, lying on her side in the grass with her arms curled over her head.

I scooted down so that I could lay facing her, propped up on my elbow. I tugged on her arms a bit, but they didn't move. "Are you going to tell me what's really wrong?" I asked.

"I told you," she sniffed, more in control than she had been a moment ago. "I hurt myself. And my dress is wet."

"Yes, and what else?"

She remained stubbornly silent for a moment and then said, "Robert left."

"Ah" was the only thing I could say without my true feelings leaking through.

"And he didn't tell me he was going. He left without saying goodbye." The hitch in her voice poked holes in my heart.

"That was not kind of him," I said, proud that I'd kept my voice neutral. Perhaps his thoughtlessness would finally free Elise from the trance he seemed to have over her.

"It's nonsensical," she said, finally pulling her arm down so that she could look up at me, her eyes swimming in pretty tears.

I mentally kicked myself. Tears weren't pretty.

Her fingers picked at the grass in front of her face. "He spent all this time with me and then he didn't have the courtesy to bid me farewell."

"And what would you have said if he'd told you he was leaving?" I asked, pushing a few strands of tear-soaked hair off of her cheek and trying not to think about how soft it was.

"I don't know." Her voice was small, like a little girl's.

I inwardly sighed. Would my dear contradictory friend ever sort herself out? Ever realize that people were not all good or all bad? Would she ever realize that a friend could be more than a friend?

What could I say to ease her pain without also pushing her toward a man who didn't deserve her? "Maybe he didn't know what to say either. We men are often stupid, you know?"

She laughed a little and turned onto her back. I resisted the urge to scoot closer, even though the idea of looking down into her face as she lay here in the cool grass was...

I kicked myself again.

"Perhaps," I continued, "since he knew you could not go with him, the farewell would have been too difficult." I deserved a sainthood for how kind I was being to that man.

"But he didn't have to leave," she complained, her brow adorably furrowed as she looked up at the trees and then over at me. "There is nothing in Stormbrook for a week and a half. What would possess him to go early, to skip the festival in Dressle where he's guaranteed an audience?"

Having her face turned toward me as I lay beside her was very distracting. "He's gone to Stormbrook then?" I asked, latching onto that detail. "How do you know that?"

"The smithy saw him leaving first thing this morning, like a thief in the night," she said bitterly.

"Or a thief in the dawn?" I teased.

She laughed and sat up, brushing at her cheeks. As I sat up beside her, she sighed and looked off at the trees for several moments before leaning sideways to put her head on my shoulder. "I never suspected I would be one to cry over a boy."

My heart pinched. Partially for her pain. Partially for mine.

"Attraction makes fools of us all." I wouldn't say love. I refused to believe that she loved him, so attraction was all I would suggest.

She wrapped her arms around my elbow and sighed. "Are you calling me foolish?"

"No. I was speaking to myself."

She raised her head and looked at me. "Oh really? Has some girl caught your eye?"

I swallowed. I could lie and say no, but I didn't want to lie to Elise. And with Robert gone, maybe it was time I said something. "Yes," I admitted, my pulse pounding in my neck. "But I doubt she has any idea."

Her brow creased in confusion. "Why not tell her?"

My shoulders sank, wishing she would just know the truth without me having to spell it out for her. I should tell her, I should, but with her tears for Robert not even dried on her cheeks, I couldn't believe that this was the right moment. "We should go back," I said, hoping she'd forget the words I'd just spoken. "We both have work to do." I moved to stand, even though I hated pulling away from her.

"It's a good thing a sore ankle won't keep me from singing," she mused, trying to stand on her own.

Instead of waiting for her to ask me to help, I just took her wrist with one hand and put my other hand at her back, pulling her to her feet and waiting for her to balance.

Elise

Hatcher waited patiently as I tested my ankle, keeping an arm around my waist for support. I looked up at him. This man was so dear to me. He was always so kind, even when I was being illogical. I didn't deserve his friendship, and I'd never be able to repay him for all he'd done for me.

His eyes caught mine and I smiled up at him. But instead of smiling in return, a look of longing crossed his face and I didn't know what to make of it. So I looked away, not ready to think about it.

"Shall I carry you?" he offered.

"No. I'll be slow, but I think I can manage."

He wrapped one arm round my back and offered the other for me to hold on to for balance. His hand tightened around my waist, urging me forward so that I could hobble along beside him.

We walked along in silence, and I couldn't help wondering what girl it was who had captured Hatcher's attention. And what did attraction mean anyway? Did he just think this girl was pretty? Had they spoken? Were they friends? A twinge of jealousy twisted in my gut, along with strong feelings of dislike for whatever girl it was. I did my best to shove both feelings aside. "Thanks for coming to find me." I said, realizing how lucky I was that he'd been willing to come look for me. "I don't know what I would have done if I'd been on my own."

"Of course," he said, adjusting his grip.

"I hope I'm not keeping you from something important," I said reluctantly.

"This is important," was all he said and helped me all the way back to the Hatchers' tent.

After we'd made it back, I changed while standing on one foot with Hatcher waiting like an anxious mama outside the curtain. I managed just fine, thanks to my stubbornness. Then Hatcher helped me find a spot close by where I could sing. It was right next to a tree that I could lean against for balance if needed.

"Will this be all right?" Hatcher asked.

I gave him my most reassuring smile. "It's perfect. Now go, you have pretty costumes to sell."

He looked reluctant but went on his way, leaving me to focus on selling my own wares.

I'd wasted more than half a day looking for and crying over Robert, so it was well past time for me to get down to business. It wasn't just today that had been wasted. I'd wasted a great deal of time this week, and I was sure that my purse would be woefully under-filled when I went to count my earnings tomorrow morning before we packed up to move on.

Elise

We were packing up to leave the next morning when Ludly came by to see me. "How's my favorite songbird?" he asked.

"Busy," I answered. "What can I do for you?"

"Ah," he said with a mysterious smile. "It's not what you can do for me, but what I"—he put a hand up with a dramatic flare—"can do for you."

I was intrigued enough that I gave him my full attention. Ludly didn't usually perform unless he was actually performing. "Well, let's have it."

"I've been asked to pass on a riddle."

My brow furrowed. "I don't like riddles."

He shrugged. "It's not a particularly good one. Nonetheless, I must recite it." He cleared his throat. "When the entertainer of kings is the color of clouds and blows away just as swiftly, does the songbird follow or stay in its nest?"

I blinked at him. "What?"

He grinned and said, "Good luck!" before cheerily turning away.

"Wait." I stopped him. "Say it again."

He turned back and patiently recited it again.

I was befuddled. "The entertainer of kings? A jester?"

He nodded.

"A jester the color of clouds," I muttered, then frowned. "White. Robert?" I looked up at Ludly, hope bursting forth. "Is this Robert's riddle?"

He grinned, gave me a little salute, and was off.

Robert had left me a message...in a riddle? So he hadn't completely abandoned me. He'd left a message.

Running the riddle through my head, I had to agree that Robert had certainly blown away swiftly, but "Does the songbird follow?" That must be referring to me. He wanted me to follow after him! The large stone that had been sitting inside my chest since his departure finally eased up. He hadn't forgotten me. He wanted me to follow. Yet, on the heels of that elation came confusion. How was I to do such a thing? Was it a challenge to see how I would respond? If he wanted me to follow, why not just tell me *before* he left? And ask me to come with him? Was this his way of encouraging me to be more adventurous? I knew how important that was to him, and I'd had a wonderful time finding the excitement in the festivals through his eyes.

But I couldn't just leave. I couldn't go chasing after him on my own. That would be foolish. Completely foolish. Wouldn't it?

Yes, I determined. Chasing after Robert on my own would be the height of pathetic stupidity, especially when he'd left me so confused. So I refocused my efforts on preparing to leave. Just because he'd left me a riddle didn't mean his departure hadn't been cruel.

Soon enough, the wagon was packed and Hatcher gave me a hand up onto the seat. As Nugget pulled us forward, my mind couldn't help returning to Robert's riddle and Robert himself. Where was he now? Was he going straight to Stormbrook, or would he stop at the smaller villages along the way, the ones that didn't hold festivals? Perhaps he would stay a day in each to give them a little show, earn a few coins and find a bed. It was the most reasonable explanation I'd been able to come up with, and it still didn't truly make sense.

We traveled the whole day, and I was happy to listen as Marshall and Hatcher kept up a steady stream of conversation.

As the sun was setting, we found a spot to pull off into the trees. Marshall jumped down to unhitch and care for Nugget while Hatcher and I pulled out cookware and bedrolls. There was another wagon of travelers close enough that we could see their camp, but not so close that we would encroach on one another. Even if the people we ended up camping near were friendly, I'd developed the habit of keeping more of a distance than Marshall or Hatcher.

While Marshall walked over to introduce himself and make friends with the other travelers, Hatcher set to work gathering stones to make a fire pit, working steadily and without complaint as usual. I made myself useful by wandering off into the trees to gather wood for the fire. It was late summer, so finding dry wood wasn't as tough as when we traveled in the spring.

I dropped off one armful of wood. Hatcher gave me an easy smile from where he sat on the ground, digging out a small pit. I returned to the trees, my mind wandering as I made another small pile of wood in my arms. We were still a day out from Dressle, and I looked forward to seeing Dorothy and the others again. I also looked forward to sleeping in a real bed. I loved sharing the loft with Kat, listening to her prattle on about her latest beau. Would she still be smitten with George? Would she be engaged? She was certainly old enough, and a lot could happen in six weeks. The idea made me melancholy. What would it be like to lose Kat in that way? Or Hatcher, for that matter. Surely he'd be looking to marry soon. My stomach dropped. Saints, I dreaded that thought.

I pulled another stick free from the undergrowth and was adding it to my bundle when my arm started to sting. I brushed at it, then looked to see what had jabbed me.

Blast it all. It was a wasp. A quick look around revealed multiple angry wasps.

I dropped my collection and ran just as I felt another sting on my shoulder. I picked up speed, waving my arms over my head, hoping I could fend off any more of the wasps, but felt another stab on my neck and one on my finger.

When I'd run as far as I thought was necessary to escape the evil creatures, I stopped for only a moment to catch my breath before tramping on toward the campsite. As I walked, I could feel that I'd been stung on my shoulder, neck, finger and elbow, all on my right side. I shook my arm, trying to shake the burning pain away, and breathed through my teeth as I neared the wagon.

I didn't see Marshall around, but Hatcher was kneeling by the ring of stones he was preparing for our fire. "Hatch!" I called out.

Maddox

I looked up at the sound of Elise calling my name. At first I was confused; she'd gone to get more firewood but was coming back empty-handed. Then I noticed her grimace and the way she shook her hand at her side and curled her shoulder in discomfort.

I dropped the rock I'd been holding and ran to her. "What's wrong?"

"I must have disturbed a wasp nest," she said, her voice clogged with tears.

"Where were you stung?"

"My arm, my shoulder." She reached up and touched the back of her shoulder.

"Let me see." I spun her around and found a wasp still clinging to the back of her dress. I quickly lifted the fabric away from her shoulder, then flicked the pest off. "What can I do? Shall I fetch water? Does mud soothe stings?" I couldn't remember. Kat had been stung when she was little, but I couldn't remember how my mother had treated it.

"No, just—" She sucked in a breath through her teeth, and I realized that she was shaking.

"Here, sit down." I held on to her waist and elbow and lowered her to the ground. I noticed another red welt on her finger. "Did they get your hand?"

She nodded. "And my neck. We need to gather plantain leaves."

"What?"

"It's an herb. It's called broadleaf plantain, and it grows all over this forest floor." She looked around on the ground, her face a mask of pain. "There," she said, pointing to a common weed. "That right there. See how it has five veins running up from the center? That's what you're looking for. Gather as much as you can find."

I didn't question her; I just did it. My eyes scoured the ground, and each time I spotted one of the plants, which clung close to the ground, I'd pluck off every single leaf, though there were usually only eight or ten. Then I'd search for more.

"Once you have a good bundle," she said, her voice quivering, "you need to put it into a ball on your palm and start rubbing it between your hands."

I plucked several more leaves and then went to kneel in front of her, smooshing the leaves into a ball and trying to do as she'd instructed. "Like this?"

"Yes. Push hard. You want to generate some heat. Eventually the juice from the leaves will start to come out."

I had to rub the leaves together quite a bit before it worked, but eventually my hands were smeared with green. I showed her.

"Good. Now put those leaves on the stings." She held up her arm, showing me the red dots that were already swelling. One on her finger, the

other on her elbow.

I pressed bits of mushy leaves onto the spots, and she used her other hand to hold them in place.

"Now my neck," she said, her voice tense as she continued to shake.

I put the rest on her neck. "What about your shoulder? We're running out of hands."

"Here." She bent her elbow so that she could use the hand on her stung arm to hold the leaves to her neck. "You'll have to get more leaves."

"Where are the other stings?"

"My shoulder blade."

Right. Where I'd flicked off the wasp earlier. I pushed her chemise out of the way, my throat feeling suddenly swollen as I fixed my gaze on her back and saw that there were four stings grouped close together on her shoulder blade. The tiny demon that had clung to her dress had certainly left his mark. The stings were red and puffy. They looked awful.

"All right. More leaves," I said mostly to myself and crawled around, finding more of the herb. As I rubbed it between my hands, I asked, "How does this help?"

"It draws out the venom."

"Oh." I probably should have paid more attention to Dorothy's home remedies. I rubbed my hands together until the leaves released their juices, then I carefully spread them over Elise's swollen back and held them in place. "I'm so sorry this happened."

"Not your fault," she bit out, though she didn't seem to be shaking as much.

"How do you know all of this?"

She shrugged her uninjured shoulder. "I've lived outside my whole life. You pick up on things."

I was incredibly grateful for her knowledge, because without it I would have been completely useless trying to help her. "Is it helping?"

"Yes," she said, taking a deep breath. "It's already significantly better."

"Good," I said. Knowing her pain had eased made my worry for her ease as well. And as the distress of the moment subsided, the feel of Elise's bare skin beneath my hands made my mouth go dry. Part of me wanted to ask how much longer the herb would need to be left on, hoping to escape the tension that seemed to soak this situation. The other part of me was content to stay silent, grateful for the opportunity to ease her pain, and yes, to touch

her skin. The skin of her shoulder blade was much paler than her forearms or her neck—untouched by the sun. The red welts on her pale skin stood out more dramatically than the others. It was a good thing her shaking had subsided; otherwise I would probably have been a worried mess. Or...more of a worried mess.

Elise

As the pain subsided and I was able to relax, I became acutely aware of the way Hatcher's fingers were pressed to my bare shoulder. My eyebrows scrunched together as I tried to figure out why the sensation made me uncomfortable and excited at the same time. I supposed it was simply because I was used to having the layers of fabric as a barrier. Still, I'd never been overly concerned about modesty like the high-born ladies were. When it came to survival, proper dress simply didn't matter, especially amongst all the other festival rats, whose biggest concern was their next meal.

Yet, sitting here in the soft dappled sunlight with the rich earth beneath me and Hatcher's warm presence behind me...I understood the vulnerability inherent in my situation, and yet that vulnerability was almost....appealing? I tried to shake off my unease, telling myself that since I fully trusted Hatcher, there was no need for it. But the more I thought on it, the more heat gathered in my chest.

When he adjusted his fingers, moving them to better press the plantain onto my skin, my stomach swooped and I had to move away.

"Thank you," I said in the calmest voice I could manage as I scooted forward. Why was I reacting this way? Why did I want...more of that unsettling feeling? I'd long ago let go of any romantic notions where Hatcher was involved. They certainly shouldn't be coming up now.

Hatcher let his hand fall away and I pulled the sleeve of my chemise and dress back into place, trapping some of the leaves between my skin and the fabric so they would hopefully keep doing some good.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked from behind me.

"Mm-hmm" was all I could manage as I tucked my hair behind my ear and stared at the ground, pulling my knees to my chest. Where was Marshall? Still talking to the other travelers?

"Good." I could hear the awkwardness in his voice. Was that because of me? Could he feel how confused and tangled up I was inside? Being around Hatcher had always been so easy, and to have this sudden nervousness was disconcerting. "I'll get the fire started," he said.

"You'll have to get more wood. I dropped what I had collected." I was anxious for him to be somewhere else. His presence was suddenly confusing, pulsing with an energy that had never been there before. It was similar to what I'd felt with Robert when he held my hand, but that was ridiculous. This wasn't the same at all.

"Very well. I'll be back." I sensed him moving closer and then felt him press a kiss to the top of my head before climbing to his feet and striding off.

I told myself to breathe. As he moved off through the trees, I looked over the stings, still covered in bits of wet plantain leaf. I sat still, doing my best to keep all the leaves in place. The stinging had subsided substantially, but it wasn't entirely gone.

My unease, on the other hand, was still fully present. I twisted my mouth to the side as I tried to unravel what was going on in my mind and my heart. Was it because I missed Robert? I did miss him. I was still heartbroken that he'd left me. But this didn't feel the way it felt with Robert. It was so different that I couldn't put words to it. I tried to shake myself out of my mishmash of thoughts and feelings. It had been difficult enough to let go of my girlhood crush of Hatcher the first time. I didn't need it interfering with a realistic relationship with Robert now. We'd be in Dressle soon, and hopefully Kat would be willing to knock some sense into me.

The wagon rumbled into the small yard in front of the Hatchers' home. Marshall jumped down as soon as the wheels stopped rolling. "Dorothy!" he hollered, jogging to the house and pushing through the front door.

I grinned as I heard squeals of excitement from both small girls and grown women alike. Hatcher chuckled as he hopped down and then offered me a hand. I took it, and just as my feet hit the ground, the door was flung open and Twyla and Didi came racing out. "Elise!"

Hatcher snorted. "Of course they're the most excited to see you," he said as he grabbed a trunk and hoisted it from the bed of the wagon.

I just gave him a smug smile and then dropped to my knees so that I could catch the girls in my arms. "Hello, my beautiful ladies. Have you

missed me?"

"Yes!" Didi declared as she squished her cheek into mine. "You've been gone forever and ever!"

"It wasn't forever," Twyla corrected Didi. "It was six weeks," she said, sounding like she was reciting something Dorothy had told them more than one time. Then she looked directly at me. "But six weeks is a very, very long time."

"I know. But we're back now for two whole weeks."

"But then you leave again."

"Yes," I said as I watched Hatcher drop the trunk by the door of the house. "But only for three weeks this time. So it won't be so terribly long." Hatcher walked up and stopped just behind the girls, his hands on his hips. "No hugs for me?" he asked.

"Maddox!" they both screamed, immediately abandoning me for their older brother.

I gratefully climbed to my feet and went to the wagon to get a load. As I pulled a trunk toward me, I was joined by Kat, who gave me a side hug. "Did you dazzle the crowds this year?" she asked.

"Yes. The dazzling was nonstop."

"Just as I suspected." We each grabbed a handle of the trunk and worked together to bring it to the house. There were only a few things that would remain here. The rest of the wagon was filled with the tent and all the wares that would be taken and sold when the festival started here in Dressle, three days from now.

We entered the house and were enveloped in much commotion. Marshall sat in a chair with four-year-old Mouse and almost three-year-old Billy on his lap, both talking over each other and not caring one bit. Twyla and Didi were following Hatcher around as he tried to unload one of the trunks, and Dorothy was in the kitchen, making tea.

I took in a deep breath of contentment. It was a wonderful commotion.

Elise

I'd spent the past several days playing with the girls and helping Kat with some basic sewing. I kept wanting to tell Kat about Robert. I wanted to blurt out all the excitement and all the hurt and confusion, but as the days had gone by, Robert's abandonment had become a thing of shame inside me. He wouldn't have done it if I'd been enough. If I were truly what he wanted, I would have been brave enough to accept his invitation and find a way to follow after him.

But that terrified me. I wanted to do it, but how? How could I possibly be that brave?

I was avoiding Hatcher, but only a little bit. The unsettling feeling I'd had when he helped me with my wasp stings hadn't ever come back with the same intensity, but it was still there and I couldn't explain it. It lay hidden under the surface, enough that I could ignore it if my mind was occupied with other things. But then I'd brush past Hatcher the way I had so many times before, and instead of feeling nothing extraordinary, I felt... discomfited? Embarrassed? Or maybe just aware? Whatever it was, I didn't like it, especially on top of my turmoil over Robert.

Fortunately, today was the start of the Dressle festival, and I was anxious to spread my wings and throw my voice out into the world. We'd set up the tent last night and Hatcher had slept there. Marshall and I had gotten up early so we could help Hatcher open and so I would have time to change and find a suitable spot for performing.

The people of Dressle were familiar enough to me that having them stop to listen gave me real satisfaction. The Hatchers had allowed me to build a life here, enough that coming back felt like coming home. And for a lifelong festival rat, that was miraculous indeed. At midday, I went to the tent and found Dorothy and the rest of the family there, lunch in hand. Kat and I took our food a ways off to eat and talk. She spent much of the time half listening to me while she looked around at the crowds, probably hoping to spot George.

When we finished, she helped me change into a more elaborate costume than I'd worn this morning. Ludly and I wanted to do our combined performance twice at this festival, and tonight would be our first one. Since I knew I wanted to be in this costume, and since I wanted to avoid asking Hatcher for help, I'd decided to have Kat help me now.

As I left the tent, Marshall was talking with a young couple and Hatcher was standing just outside, inviting people to browse the wares. When I passed him, he smiled. "I think that's my favorite costume of yours."

"Shh, don't tell the others," I teased. "They may get jealous that their maker favors one over the rest."

As I walked away, I thought about what Robert had said about the Hatchers. About how they made more money than I was likely to see in a lifetime. He was right, of course. The reason I was able to wear this elaborate costume was because Hatcher insisted on making it for me. I always paid him, but I knew it was less than he would make selling it to someone else. Still, it wasn't like I just took from them without giving in return, and I had to hope that any outsiders didn't think I was using them. Even more, I hoped that the Hatchers never had reason to resent me for all they'd done. But, as Robert had pointed out, eventually I would find someone and they would be my family, and then I wouldn't have to worry about the Hatchers tiring of me.

My performance with Ludly and the Starfire troupe that evening went very well. But having Hatcher watching over me was a little different. The way he looked at me with the fire reflecting in his eyes seemed different, even though I knew it was the same look he always had when he watched me.

I was making more of this than it was. That silly incident with the wasps was wreaking havoc on my friendship with Hatch, and I didn't appreciate it. The Hatchers were my lifeline. They were the only reason I was not only successful but *alive*, and I would not put that in jeopardy.

When I finished my performance, I found Hatcher and took his arm, the way I always did, determined to stop whatever awkwardness I had conjured.

"It looked like they had a new dancer," he commented.

"Yes. Miley had to leave, so they've been training this new girl, Sasha."

"This was her first performance?"

"With the troupe, yes." Curious that he would have noticed her.

When we got back to the tent, I left him by the fire with Marshall and went in to change so that I could leave my costume here before going back to the house with Marshall. Hatcher would stay here to watch over things.

Once I got behind the curtain and took off one cape, it became clear that my brilliant idea of having Kat help me into the costume had only been part of the issue. I now needed to get *out* of it.

I did my best to find the different connection points, the ties and clasps. But it was dim and I'd only worn this costume twice before.

Straining, I reached for one of the ties in the middle of my back. It connected the second cape but blocked my access to the laces that held me in the dress. The difficult closure was made even more difficult by the ache I still felt in my shoulder from the wasp stings.

I must have made too much noise. Or maybe Hatcher just knew the costume well enough to know that I would need help. Either way, I shouldn't have been surprised to hear him outside the curtain.

I stilled, quieting my distress.

"Elise?" Hatcher's voice called from the other side. "Are you stuck?" "Yes," I admitted.

He didn't respond, likely because he expected me to ask for help the way I always did. Or at least, the way I always had before. But now it would feel strange and too personal. After the way I'd reacted when he helped me with the wasp stings, his hands pressed to my bare back...

Finally he cleared his throat and asked, "Do you need help?"

"No," I said forcefully—probably too forcefully. "No, I've got it. I can figure it out."

It was just different now. I didn't know why. Maybe it went back to what he'd said on the bank of the stream when I'd been crying over Robert, about attraction making us fools. No matter the reasons, I couldn't ask him for help now. The thought of inviting him in here when I was in this state made my neck flush with heat. It would certainly be a betrayal of my feelings for Robert if I were to explore these odd feelings any further.

There was a fat moment of silence before he said, "All right," and I heard him retreat.

I took a deep breath and tried again, finally able to pull on the right string that loosened the cape, allowing it to fall to the floor. Then I got to work on the laces of the elaborate bodice.

Maddox

It took her a long time, which made me wonder why she hadn't just asked for help. Was she in a state of even more undress than usual? I choked on the thought and started thinking about something else, returning to the fire.

After several more minutes, she still hadn't come out, so I went in to check on her, and just as I was about to ask if she was certain she didn't need assistance, the curtain was pulled aside and she stepped out, bumping into my chest.

I grabbed her forearms to steady her, and when she looked up and saw that it was me, I swear...

I had to be wrong. That couldn't be desire in her eyes. She didn't want me. She was pining for that idiot magician with the pocket watch. But her wide eyes and flushed cheeks, plus the way she didn't move away...all of it combined to make my body step forward and lean down. I was going to kiss her. She wanted me to kiss her, right?

The sound of her sudden inhale made me stop and I pulled back, stepping away as though that had always been my plan. It was not smoothly done. "Finally figured it out?" I asked, my voice cracking.

"Um" was all she said.

I let go of her arms and walked away, screaming at myself that I was the biggest idiot ever to roam the earth. What was wrong with me? How had I convinced myself in that moment that Elise—*Elise*—wanted me? It was complete madness, and I knew better. Three whole years of experience had taught me better.

I let the cool night air hit my face and clear my head.

"She ready?" my father asked from his place beside the fire.

I nodded. "She should be out soon," I said and picked up a stick to poke at the fire.

Elise wandered out, and soon she and my father had left to go back home and I was left to slump on the log by the fire, my head in my hands. I had never been more grateful to be left here alone.

"Maddox mentioned you ran into an old friend in Murrwood," Kat said as we lay across her bed on Tuesday evening.

Sharp nerves rose up inside me. I supposed this conversation was inevitable, and truth be told, I wanted to have it. "Yes, I did."

"So then..." She rolled to her side so that she could see me. "Why haven't you told me about him yet? You've been here for days, listening to me talk until I'm blue in the face about George, but you didn't think I'd want to hear about this friend you ran into who is a *man*?"

I looked over at her, trying to smile at her obvious excitement, but instead my eyes were stinging with the promise of tears.

"Oh dear," she said, sitting up. "What happened? Did he hurt you?" I shook my head.

"When Maddox told me, I wondered why it hadn't come up. I thought maybe you just wanted to keep it to yourself, but clearly something is very wrong. Who was he?"

Her concern was gratifying, and I sniffed back my emotions. "We grew up together, our families attending a lot of the same festivals."

"All right," she said, as though waiting for me to tell her what my tears were about. "So will he be staying south?"

"No, he's trying something new."

"But he's not here?"

I shook my head, not bothering to explain it, because I didn't understand it.

"And do you like him? As more than a friend?" She gave me a stern look. "I'll know if you don't tell me the truth."

I smiled and nodded. "We spent a lot of time together, and it was so wonderful being with him," I confessed in a whisper. "He made me laugh. He told me how beautiful I was. He admired my singing. He made me feel...seen."

Her brow furrowed, like she was dissatisfied. "So then, why are you unhappy?"

I let out a sigh. "Because he's not here. He skipped Dressle and went straight to Stormbrook."

Her chin pulled back. "Why would he do that?"

I raised my hands in an annoyed shrug. "I have no idea. It would have made more sense for him to come here first."

"That is strange. There won't be any crowds in Stormbrook until next week."

"See? It doesn't make sense. It's like he can't just follow the established route; he has to make it up as he goes. He's adventurous, which I love, but I also hate it because it means he left me."

"Clearly you wished to spend more time with him."

"Of course I did, but he didn't even say goodbye."

"Not a word?" she asked.

"Well..." Did I dare share Robert's invitation? What if she laughed at it? What if she called the notion ridiculous?

Then again, what if she didn't? The idea of finding a way to follow Robert had been tapping at the edges of my consciousness for days, but I was too afraid to truly consider it.

She sat up straight. "What? What did he say?"

"He didn't tell me goodbye, but he did send someone with a message." She clasped her hands together. "And what did it say?"

"It was a riddle, but it seemed to be...inviting me to follow after him." I heard my own uncertainty.

She pressed a hand to her heart. "That's so sweet. He must really have feelings for you if he's inviting you to follow him."

"Maybe."

"And obviously you have feelings for him."

"Yes."

She scooted closer. "Has he kissed you?"

I shook my head. "No." Not that I would have minded, though it would have been quite fast, and just the thought of it made me nervous.

"But you like him," Kat pointed out as though I needed reminding.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't go around kissing everyone that I like." I hadn't gone around kissing *anybody*.

"You kiss Maddox."

I shook my head, instantly rejecting the comparison. "That's only on the cheek. We're friends, that's all." Never mind that two nights ago, I could have sworn that he leaned in to kiss me before changing course. Never mind that his hands on my back, helping to ease the pain of the wasp stings,

had made me burn and shiver all at once. Never mind that I was suddenly aware of him.

"So you want to be more than friends with this boy? What's his name?" "Robert White."

"You want to be courted by him?" Her eyes were huge and she bit her bottom lip as she grinned.

"How am I supposed to know? I've never been courted by anyone. I've never felt..." What did I feel for Robert? It wasn't love, not yet, but I believed it could be. Right now, it was familiarity combined with the excitement of always looking for adventure. The excitement of feeling wanted. I buried my head in my arms. "I don't know what I'm doing, Kat. Tell me what to do."

"If you have feelings for him, then why not do something about it?" she asked, sitting up as she warmed to the idea. "He invited you to follow him to Stormbrook. Why not go there? You're independent."

Her suggestion took me off guard, even though it was something I'd been half hoping for. "Are you trying to get rid of me?" I teased, though I was also half serious. "I always travel with your father and Hatcher, and they aren't going to Stormbrook this year." Plus, I was almost certain that I wasn't brave enough to go after Robert.

"Well," she said, more hesitant than I was used to seeing her, "perhaps it would be good for you and Maddox to be away from each other."

I pulled back. What a strange idea. "Why?"

She thought for a moment, looking far more serious than usual. "Maddox is getting older, Elise. It's time for him to find a wife, and you don't want him."

I didn't know what to do with her words. They were...true, I supposed. But they didn't feel right. I sat up and shook my head. "What does that have to do with me leaving?"

"Well, if you're not going to marry him, you might as well get out of the way for some other girls."

My heart pinched, hurt by the idea that Kat would tell me to get out of the way. "I would never get in the way of his happiness." Such an idea was awful. Of course I wanted Hatcher to be happy. How could she think otherwise?

"I know you wouldn't do it on purpose—" I stood and took a few steps away.

"I'm sorry," Kat said. "This isn't coming out the right way. I only mean that both of you should be looking to settle down. You know Maddox and my dad were planning to skip the Faehurst festival. They're spending an extra week here, fixing up the shop, and I *know* that makes you antsy."

She was right. I wasn't looking forward to giving up the money that I could earn in that week, but the Hatchers had been doing so well that they wanted to put some of their earnings into improving their shop on High Street.

"Plus," Kat continued, "you've never spoken of having an interest in any boy or man before now, and I don't want you to waste the opportunity, especially when he *asked you* to follow."

"You think I should fling myself at Robert?" I asked, chewing on my thumb.

"If you want him, then yes," she said with full confidence. "Go admit your feelings. Demand to know his in return."

"But...I don't know if I want him." That admission sat in the air between us. I think it surprised me more than it did her. "Or at least, I don't know how *much* I want him."

She breathed deeply and let it out in a sigh. "Well, in that case, it really doesn't matter what you do."

Anger sparked inside me. "Of course it matters. This is my life. The path I choose matters."

"The path is inconsequential if you don't know what you want. If you don't know your destination, the path you take makes no difference."

I glared at her. "I'm asking for advice."

"Then tell me what you want," she demanded, her gaze steady.

I hated that I didn't have an answer. Robert was wonderful and exciting. He made me want to be braver, yet whenever I was with him, I felt unsteady. Most of the time, I enjoyed that feeling. The feeling of falling and not knowing where I would land. But sometimes, especially lately, it felt precarious instead of exciting. But did that mean I needed to be braver? Or did it mean I needed to step back?

What would the mother of wolves do? She sang songs that brought life back to the desolate. Was this a way that I could do that? If I went after Robert, would that bravery bring us together? Would I be singing life into the possibility of Robert and me? I groaned in frustration. "I don't know, Kat. Tell me what I *should* want."

Kat's eyes softened and a sad smile curved her mouth. "I can't tell you what you want, especially when it involves my brother."

"You don't need to protect Hatcher from me." In fact, I resented the idea. "It's not as though he's pining for me, Kat. I'm not keeping him from pursuing any other girls."

"How would you know?" she retorted.

I blinked. "What?" What did that mean?

"Nothing." She turned away from me.

"Don't say *nothing*. Tell me what you meant. If you're going to accuse me of keeping your brother from being happy, you'd better be able to explain why. I want *nothing* but good things for Hatcher."

She looked back at me, her brow defiant, and shook her head. "I won't gossip about my brother. I love you. You know I do, Elise. But my loyalty is to him first."

An ache shot through my heart. Not only because she'd chosen Hatcher over me, but because it reminded me of the kind of loyalty—true loyalty—that could exist between siblings. Her words just multiplied my confusion. Was she implying that Hatcher was waiting around for me? Wanting me? Or was he just hoping I'd choose someone so that he could stop feeling obligated to take care of me?

Was that it? Had I become a burden to the Hatchers? A hindrance to their happiness and prospects? Was this suggestion from Kat more than just a crazy idea? Maybe she was trying to tell me I should move on.

I didn't know. I didn't know, and I couldn't talk about it anymore.

So I turned away and crawled into my own bed, turning to face the wall and shutting her out. Shutting out the idea that my long-ago feelings for him might be rearing up to wreak havoc on Hatcher and his entire family.

Her suggestion kept me up long into the night. She'd called me independent. She made it sound like I could do anything I wanted...but could I? And was I brave enough to admit that Robert was what I wanted? Maybe I had lost myself with the Hatchers. Maybe I had changed. Maybe I was meant to be more like Robert, rugged and fierce and prepared to take risks because we could see the potential reward. And as much as I hated to imagine it, what if the Hatchers were ready for me to move on? What if they needed me to go, but were too kind to suggest such a thing?

Elise

I returned to the tent after a full day of performing, my steps slow, my heart heavy. What was I going to do? What was the right thing to do?

I pulled my hat from my head with a sigh and was startled when Hatcher suddenly appeared at my side. "Are you ready to go?" he asked, his face excited.

"Go where? Home?"

"No. Well, yes. Home first so that we can eat, but then we'll go to the village dance."

My eyebrows jumped. "They're doing one tonight? While the festival is going?"

He grinned. "Yes. It will be a bash, I'm sure."

He was so excited about it that despite my turmoil over him and Robert and...everything, his enthusiasm started to rub off on me, just a little. We always had a grand time at the dances whenever we were in town and able to participate.

"Come on," he said, grabbing my hand and tugging me along. "You can change at home."

I did my best to match my shorter strides to his long ones, while trying to ignore the odd feeling of *rightness* that having his hand in mine produced.

As we neared the house, Kat ran out the front door to meet us. "We're going, right?" she said, wrapping her arms around my elbow and pulling me away from Hatcher. "Tell me he convinced you."

I laughed. "He didn't have to convince me. I'm happy to go."

"Oh good. Come along, I've chosen the perfect dresses for both of us."

True to her word, when we got up into the loft, Kat had already laid out a dress for each of us. Mine was blue and hers was purple. She loved for us to

dress in unique but complementary outfits. I happily changed into mine, grateful that I didn't need to make that decision.

We ate quickly, and then the three of us headed toward the village square. The festival was still going, despite the fact that half the vendors and half the customers would be gone.

When we arrived, the dance was already under way—the small band of men were stomping and playing their instruments. Before I could object, Hatcher pulled me into the swarm of dancers, one of his hands on my waist and the other holding my own hand. We took two steps forward, two steps back, then turn, turn, circling with all the other dancers.

We'd danced together for years, so it was easy and familiar dancing with Hatcher, but at the same time...not. Yes, my body knew how to move with him. I knew that if he pressed a certain spot on my back, I needed to move to the right, but if he pushed with his palm in another spot, I moved left. But being so close to him made all my uncertainty about Robert twist and writhe inside of me. And when the first song ended and the next song was slower and more intimate—a song meant for lovers—he didn't lead me to the edge of the crowd. He kept me there on the dance floor, urging me to move closer.

I looked away, refusing to believe that his gaze was any different than it had been before. But as we swayed, his thumb drew lazy circles on my back, and Kat's words about how I didn't want him kept rat-a-tatting in my mind.

When his hand on my back pulled me closer still, I went all too willingly. I closed my eyes and let my chin rest on his shoulder. What would it be like to want Hatcher? What would it be like for him to want me back? My stomach dipped and swooped at the thought, helped along by the way his hand tightened around my own and the way his head rested against mine.

Curse Kat and her suggestions. Somehow, her words and Hatcher's recent actions had combined into a giant ball of confusion. Hatcher's nearness was pulling up all my old feelings, making me think that perhaps my infatuation with him three years ago hadn't been so outlandish after all. Maybe he saw me as something more than just another member of the family. Maybe.

No. I forcefully banned all such nonsense from my head. Hatcher was my best friend, and I wouldn't disrespect that by buying into some silly notion of a love match between us. I wasn't a frightened fourteen-year-old girl anymore.

Robert was real, and he knew me from years ago. He cared about me. He wanted an adventure with me. He'd even hinted at building a life together. If I allowed old and unrealistic daydreams to get in the way of something real, I would regret it.

I lifted my head and brought my eyes back to Hatcher's, telling myself that the softness in his gaze and the smile that tugged at his mouth were those of a friend. That's how it had always been, and that's how it would remain. If Kat believed I was getting in the way of Hatcher finding future happiness, then there was only one thing I could do.

I would get out of the way.

Maddox

After that night when I'd bungled an attempt to kiss Elise, I'd expected things to be more strained between us. So having her here with me, swaying to the music just like we always did, brought a sense of relief. Could she sense my desperation to hold her? Did she have any idea how much I longed to be closer, and then closer still? As we stepped and spun, I felt her go soft in my arms, and for just a few moments I thought I could be brave enough to ask her for more, maybe even kiss her.

But then she stiffened again and drew back. Not enough to be insulting, but enough that I felt the withdrawal.

We danced the rest of the evening, sometimes together, other times apart, but through it all she remained a little distant.

As we walked home, Elise continued to be withdrawn. She seemed pensive, and not just for the evening, but for three days afterward. Her interactions with me were polite and she tried to be friendly, but she was constantly distracted.

Then on Thursday evening, she and I were sitting at dinner with my family when she said, "I have some exciting news."

Exciting. By the way she'd acted, I would have expected her to say dismal news, or worrying news. Plus, as I looked at her...she didn't look excited. I set down my fork and gave her my full attention.

"I've decided it's time for me to go on a little adventure." She said it with a smile on her lips, but nerves were scattered all over her face, and her grip on her fork was making her knuckles white.

"Can I come?" Twyla asked immediately.

Elise smiled down at her. "No, Twy. I'm afraid not. I have to go adventuring on my own. It will be like a quest," she said, trying to make it sound exciting for my sisters.

Dorothy spoke the question on my mind. "What are you talking about, Elise?"

She slowly looked up at Dorothy and took a deep breath. "I am going to travel to Stormbrook," she said with a confidence that I knew was feigned.

Silence fell over the table, interrupted only by the continued clatter of spoons from Mouse and Billy.

She was going...to Stormbrook? Was this because of me? Because I couldn't just keep my feelings to myself? Because I'd tried to kiss her? Because I still wanted to kiss her? Every day, every hour. Had she realized how I watched her and admired her? Was she running from me?

I thought about all those questions for several long moments as we all sat in stunned silence, and the only answer I could come up with was—probably. This was probably my fault.

"Why?" I finally said. It came out harsh, but really, how could it not? I knew what was in Stormbrook. *White* was in Stormbrook, and I wasn't.

"Well, Kat and I were talking the other night, and she reminded me how important it is to be brave and go after the things we want."

I stood so fast that my chair toppled behind me. "This was your idea?" I threw at Kat, who opened her mouth to defend herself.

Elise spoke first. "Don't blame her," she insisted. "This is my decision. I make my own way and choose my own path, and I won't go on being a burden to all of you—"

"Who said you were a burden?" I asked at the same time that Dorothy said, "You're not!"

"I am!" Elise said with her hard stubbornness. "You might not see it that way, but I am. And I'm...so grateful." The words were coated in sincerity, which made her decision even more confusing. "But I need to know that I can do what needs to be done without relying on—"

"This is about White, isn't it?" I asked, wanting to get to the point. If she was going to leave, I wanted her to at least admit the truth of what she was going after.

She swallowed and had a hard time looking up at me. "Robert is there, yes, but that's not—"

I turned away and her voice faded. I wanted to tell her that White was no good for her, that she would regret it. But I knew how stubborn she could be. If I pushed back, would she just dig in her heels more? Would she resent my interference?

"I'll go to Stormbrook and Lorta with the others, and then I'll come back," she said as if this trip was nothing to worry about. "I'm not leaving forever. I just have to do this. I have to know that if someday I need to go out on my own, I have that ability." The tone of her voice had finally turned truly confident, and she spoke with a finality that I knew was very real. I wouldn't be changing her mind.

I could point out that leaving us for a couple of weeks didn't prove anything. But I was afraid if I did that, then she would stay away longer just to prove she could. I took a deep breath. "You're just going to walk?" Maybe if I pointed out her failure to think it through...

"I know how to walk. I've done it before."

"And have you forgotten about the wild animals that live in the mountains?"

Elise scowled at me.

"Why not just stay with me—with us?" I said, trying hard to sound like I was only suggesting and not begging. "Travel with us, and next year, you can find Robert again."

"It's not just about Robert," she insisted.

Yes, it was.

"So much could happen, Elise," Dorothy finally spoke up. "We can rearrange our plans, can't we, Maddox? You and Marshall can take her to Stormbrook. You can do the same route two years in a row."

"Yes," I answered immediately. Anything. If it meant she wouldn't run off to Robert, endangering herself, then fine, we could do that.

Elise immediately shook her head. "No. Marshall has plans for the shop. They need to be here, doing what they already have planned. I'm not going to disrupt your lives and your business. That's not what I want."

"I'll be worried sick," Dorothy said, and it was clear that she was not exaggerating. Dorothy saw Elise as one of her own.

Elise had a hard time looking at Dorothy. "I was raised on the road, remember? I know how to do this."

"Alone?" Dorothy challenged.

"Even alone, if necessary."

Dorothy, Kat and I all started to protest, but Elise spoke over us. "But I won't be alone. I've already arranged to go with the Pruetts. They leave on Saturday, so I'll be going with them."

That was a great comfort, a thousand times better than her traveling on her own, but I still hated that she was going. And Saturday was only two days away.

"It's all arranged," she said with a smile that I assume was supposed to be reassuring. "It will be fine."

"But," Didi spoke up with tears in her eyes, "I don't want you to go. You said you were staying for two weeks."

Elise gave Didi a hug and ended up spending the rest of the evening comforting and playing with the girls. I didn't know if she did it to be kind or if she did it to avoid speaking with the rest of us. Either way, she went up to bed without ever letting me broach the subject again.

I stayed up late in the night, desperate to figure out how to *fix this*. I had to say something. I had to. I couldn't let her go chasing after Robert without telling her at least some of what I felt. I churned over the words in my head, practicing them and imagining how she would respond. I couldn't just say I was in love with her. It would be too much. Either it would scare her off or she wouldn't believe me. No, after so many years of friendship—so many years of me idiotically thinking that silence was the best course of action—I couldn't expect her to take that well, especially when she thought that Robert was who she wanted. I had to say just enough, but not too much.

Would she listen? Could anything I had to say make her stay?

Elise

I sang all the next day, both to earn money and to avoid all the uncomfortable interactions with the Hatchers. Maybe I shouldn't have told them yesterday. Perhaps I should have waited until today so there would be less time for me to second-guess myself.

When it was time to head back home, I was surprised to find Hatcher waiting for me. He nodded toward the tent. "I'll wait for you to change, then we can head back to the house."

"Aren't you staying here to look after the tent?" I asked. He and Marshall usually took turns staying and going back to the house. Marshall had stayed last night, so I'd been counting on Hatcher staying with the tent tonight so I could avoid the conversation that I felt looming.

He shook his head. "I wanted to be able to see you off in the morning."

I couldn't very well argue with such a kind sentiment. We were great friends, after all. "I'll be only a few moments," I said, turning toward the tent.

I made sure not to rush through changing. I couldn't afford to get tangled in my costume.

When I finished and we set out, I was surprised by Hatcher's silence. I had expected him to talk all the way home, but instead he waited until the house was nearly in sight before he caught my arm and brought us to a halt.

"What is it?" I asked, concerned by the tortured look in his eyes.

"Don't go" was all he said, but those two words were enough to tug at my heart.

I sighed, knowing that this was going to be just as hard as I'd feared. How could I make him understand that I was doing this as much for him as for me? "I've already made up my mind, Hatch. This wasn't a hasty decision."

"What do you think you'll find there?" he asked.

I cast my eyes about, hoping to find a way to explain, but strangely, all that came to mind was my mother's story. Perhaps that would have to be enough. "My mother used to tell me a story, about the mother of wolves. Have I ever told you?"

He shook his head.

I smiled as I remembered my mother lying beside me in our wagon, telling me stories. "It's about finding your wild self."

He pulled his chin in. "Your wild self? You want to be wild?"

I chuckled, but it was hollow. "No. Not in that way. The wildness isn't about being crazy or irresponsible. It's about bravery and freedom, and making your own choices."

"You're looking for freedom?" he asked, and I could see the offense in his eyes. "Have we put a cage around you?"

"No," I assured him. "I'm worried that I've put a cage around you." "Me?"

I nodded. "I know you feel like you have to take care of me—"
"That's not—"

"You have since the first day we met. You looked after me when I was singing at night. You found a way to give me coins so I wouldn't starve. It's what you do."

He stepped closer and took my hands in his. "What if that's what I want to do?" he asked quietly. "What if I can't think of anything I would rather be doing than taking care of you?"

I smiled at his sweetness. "And that is why you have been my very best friend. I know you've never begrudged anything you gave me, and I just can't stomach the idea that someday you will." My voice shook a little, hating even the thought that he would come to resent me. "You'll look back and see what you missed because you were so busy taking care of me."

He closed his eyes, looking frustrated. "That's not what this is. I meant that what you and I have..." He trailed off, struggling for words. "It's..." he tried again but was unable to get any more out.

"I know," I said, trying to reassure him. "And I don't want to lose it either. But someone much smarter than I am pointed out that I'm probably

getting in your way." I swallowed, still hating the idea that I was holding Hatcher back.

"You're not," he insisted.

I pulled one of my hands from his so that I could touch his cheek. "Thank you for believing that. But I hope you can understand that I have to go, for more reasons than I can explain."

He looked away, clearly frustrated, and he blinked hard for several moments before turning back. "I'm not going to put you in a cage by asking you to stay again."

Part of me rose up and insisted that such a thing would never be a cage, but the other part of me relaxed, feeling only grateful. "Thank you for trying to understand."

We continued toward the house, but although I felt we had come to an understanding, there was a space that I felt between us that seemed to grow with each step we took.

I pulled my cloak around me in the early morning chill.

"You're sure you have everything?" Kat asked, her face concerned even though all her words thus far had been supportive. She hadn't bothered to put on a shawl or shoes before coming outside.

"Yes, I'm sure," I answered. "After all, I don't have much."

She smiled at me, then said with sincerity, "I really hope you find what you seek, Elise."

"Thank you for everything, Kat."

She flashed a quick grin at me. "I live to serve," she said with a silly bow and then kissed my cheek and stepped back, leaving me to take a deep breath and turn to Hatcher.

I was ready to leave. My pack was at my feet, ready to be picked up, but I couldn't bring myself to do it quite yet. Hatcher hadn't said anything. He was leaning back against the door jamb, his face in shadow with the early morning light, his shoulders hunched, looking down at his feet. I knew he didn't think I should go, and I felt bad that he was upset with me, but...I hoped he would try to understand that this was something I needed to do.

"I suppose I'll be off, then," I said in an attempt to force him into action, but all he did was look up at me. He didn't speak or move to come nearer,

and the space between us felt awful, so awful that I had to say something. "Well, aren't you going to tell me goodbye?" I asked him, attempting to smile in a teasing way but failing miserably.

His lips twisted to the side in a frown as he looked at me, and for one heart-sickening moment, I thought he would refuse even a goodbye. But then he pushed away and walked over to stand directly in front of me. I tried to catch his eye, but his gaze was fixed downward as he took my hands in his own. His grip was light, holding just my fingers as his thumb ran across the backs of them.

We stood there for several heavy moments as I stared at the profile of his downturned face.

Finally he moved, pulling my left hand up so that he could press a kiss to my palm, and then tugged me forward into a hug. I could hardly breathe. It was such a sweet gesture that it made me second-guess my decision. If a friend as good and kind as Hatcher thought this journey was ill-fated, should I really go through with it?

He held me tight, and murmured into my hair, "Be safe, Lisey."

I blinked, confused by my own indecision. I looked over his shoulder and saw Kat standing there. She gave me a firm nod, which leant me the courage to stay my course, despite Hatcher. Kat believed I was holding him back, and I would not have that on my shoulders. "Bye, Hatch."

He finally released me, stepping back and turning away before I could catch his eye.

I blinked. Well then. I supposed it really was time to go. I shouldered my pack, a tense frown fixed to my lips, but stepped forward with determination. I passed by Kat, giving her a quick hug. "Thank you for giving me courage," I said. "Please help him to understand this is something I have to do."

She pulled back and smiled at me, even though her eyes looked watery. "Go find your destination," she encouraged.

I nodded and walked away.

Maddox

Standing in that spot, watching as Elise walked away, a dark sense of trepidation curled in my gut. I could only assume it would stay there until

she came back to me—*if* she came back to me.

She claimed she would. But she was also running after Robert White, and if she was running after him, what would stop her from staying with him? Marrying him? I'd seen her uncertainty. She wasn't sure this was the right decision, but she was sticking to it in her stubborn way, thinking she needed to be more than what she already was, not realizing she'd always been enough.

Kat came to stand beside me. "She'll come back."

"You don't know that." There was a hollowness to my voice that I didn't like.

"Maybe not, but I believe it. She might be a little lost right now, but in the end I think she's smart enough to come back to us."

Us. Is that why she would come back? To be part of our family? Always within reach, but never in my arms? What a devastating thought.

"I'm in love with her, you know." My voice broke on the last word. Humiliating, but I couldn't hold it in any longer.

Kat let out a sigh beside me. "I know."

"Do you?"

She shrugged. "She's easy to love. She won us all over."

I grunted. "That's not how I love her, Kat."

"Oh, I know. I think we've all known for quite a while that she was meant for you."

Her matter-of-fact words gave me hope, but it quickly evaporated. "If only she believed that," I said with a bitter smile.

"She's broken, Hatch," Kat said with her customary brutal compassion. "Broken people often take longer to recognize real love. But I think she will."

"But will it be too late?" I asked.

"She'll come back. I know she will. She just needs some room to realize how much we all love her." She gave a little lift of her shoulder. "Maybe she needs to miss you before she can recognize her own feelings."

I turned away, hating that I couldn't share her optimism. "I used to think she'd come around," I admitted, lowering myself to sit on the ground, suddenly too tired to do anything else. "I thought if I was just patient enough...but then White comes along and she just goes to him without hesitation." Bitterness closed my throat as I thought of the months of doubt and suspicion she'd had about me when we'd met. Yet this man, a man who

came from a past that she'd run from—this man had her full, unfettered attention and trust. I dropped my head, cradling it in my hands. "I think I'm going mad." It felt like madness. Need and jealousy and want all rolled together to make me question my own feelings and motivations. Did I not like White because he truly wasn't good enough for her? Or did I not like him simply because I didn't want her to be with anyone but me?

Elise

The Pruetts had planned to leave first thing Saturday morning. But after I'd arrived at their tiny cottage, it was clear by the havoc and the children running around half-dressed that our departure would be delayed. We got on the road just after noon.

By evening, after only half a day of travel, the aching in my feet and my shoulders made me wonder if I were nothing but a fool for doing this. In my more pessimistic moments, as I trudged beside the Pruetts' wagon, I berated myself for leaving the Hatchers. My life with them had been so much better than I would have ever dared to hope for. Perhaps that was why I felt the need to leave. Such easy happiness couldn't possibly last, so it was best that I leave—even temporarily—on my own terms. That way they could really decide if my presence was a burden or not. That way they could work on the shop while I continued to earn money, and Hatcher could chase any girl he liked without worrying about me. He'd said someone had caught his eye, so he should pursue her...he should.

Meanwhile, I would be brave and ask Robert to give us a chance. I was a born festival rat, and I needed to reclaim everything that meant. I would show him that I appreciated the excitement and adventure he lived. And maybe I wasn't as brave as he was, but I wanted to be, and I was trying to be. Right now! Right now, trudging along, traveling with the Pruetts and their chattering children to go find him, this was me being adventurous. I was creating my own excitement. Perhaps when he saw that I'd been brave enough to accept his riddled invitation and leave the Hatchers, he would see that we had a chance.

A chance for what? I wasn't sure. A first kiss? I certainly hoped so. A life together? It was too soon for me to want anything so enormous as an entire

life with Robert, but I was desperate to know him better, to see if we could be *something*. I wanted him to want me and to appreciate me, and if I ever hoped to be ready for a life with him, I had to take this chance, didn't I? I had to show him that I wanted to see more of the wide world. With him.

So I kept trudging.

We stopped for the night. I slept terribly, but I tried to be optimistic as we set out Sunday morning with the expectation that we would arrive in Stormbrook that afternoon. Unfortunately, we were delayed by a broken wagon wheel just after we set out. I couldn't believe my luck. Mr. Pruett and his son had to walk the wheel all the way back to Dressle to have it repaired, and then walk it back while Mrs. Pruett and I camped on the side of the road with the two younger children all day Sunday. Our journey that should have taken a day ended up taking more than three.

We made it to Stormbrook late Monday night, after everyone had retired to their tents and wagons. The spot we found for the Pruetts to set up shop was not a good one, but it would have to do, and set-up would have to wait for the morning. We were all obliged to bed down for the night.

With so many things going awry, it was difficult to sleep. The Stormbrook festival had already been under way for two days, but at least I had arrived, and in the morning I could finally look for Robert. I could show him just how much I wanted to take on adventures with him.

When I woke, I rushed through eating and readying for the day. I didn't put my costume on, too anxious to find Robert. But as I searched the faces in the crowds, my excitement waned. Where was he?

After an entire morning spent looking for him and not finding him, I had to go retrieve my costume and start singing. I did my best not to become disheartened, hoping perhaps my singing would draw him in, that he would recognize my voice and come looking for me.

Except he didn't.

It wasn't until that evening that I spoke to someone who knew where he was.

Not here.

"I'm sorry," I said as I pressed my fingers into my closed eyes, "Do you mean to say that he left the area? That he's gone somewhere else entirely?" *Again*?

The young acrobat grimaced. "I'm afraid so, miss."

I turned away, breathing deeply through my nose in an attempt to keep my temper in check. Then I turned back to him. "Thank you," I managed to say, and then headed toward the Pruetts' camp.

He had left. Again. He had gone ahead. Again.

I wanted to scream. Why couldn't that man just sit still? Didn't he know there was virtue to predictability and being where you were supposed to be? Especially when young ladies were wanting to confess their feelings for you?

I was such an idiot!

After hearing the news, I stomped off into the forest and screamed into my skirts. What was I supposed to do now? I sat down in the crunchy leaves and lay my forehead on my knees, trying not to think of the time and energy I'd wasted on coming here. What should I do now? What did I want to do?

Frustration reared up when I realized that what I wanted was to go back to Dressle. But that would mean traveling alone, and as much as I wanted to be brave and independent, I wasn't actually willing to risk traveling these mountains on my own. So not only could I not go back to Dressle, I also couldn't go straight to Lorta in search of Robert. I would just have to hope that this time, Robert would stay put long enough for me to find him. Lorta was the last stop on this festival circuit. Surely he would stay through to the end.

And in the meantime, I needed to stop being distracted and start earning my keep. I managed to gather only a few bits in my coin nest that afternoon and went to bed both lonely and feeling like a failure.

The next morning, I awoke with renewed conviction and did my best to take control of my situation. But I met the sunset still ill at ease, and the next day was more of the same. I had success enough. Not as much as usual, but enough to meet my needs, and yet I found so little satisfaction in it.

I was wandering the festival on Thursday, looking for a good spot to start singing, when a woman caught my eyes. I smiled then looked away, but when my gaze drifted back to her, she was beckoning wildly toward me. "You, dear," she called out. "Come here."

Her invitation made me curious and was a welcome distraction. She was obviously some sort of fortune teller or mystic, an older woman bedecked in scarves and tinkling chains with a wreath of flora on her head. As I approached, she held out her hands, reaching for me as if I could not arrive

quickly enough. Her theatrics made me smile, and I was unsurprised when she seized my hands the moment I was close enough. "Oh, I'm so glad you've *finally* come!" Her eyes were bright and luminous.

"Were you expecting me?"

She nodded vigorously, the twigs and leaves that crowned her head doing a miraculous job of staying in place. "For some time now."

I smiled a bit. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

She waved her hand through the air, and as she turned her head, I noticed a live caterpillar nestled on the leaves of her head. I looked closer and saw several ladybugs. Did she have spiders in there as well? I certainly hoped not.

"You're exactly on time, never you worry," she proclaimed, and I smiled at her contradictory statements. I appreciated a good performance, and she was very engaging.

"What is your name, mystic?" I asked.

"They call me Garnet, my dear." Ah, so this was the fortune teller who was always warning Robert that the devil was after him. "Now, tell me." She fixed her eyes on mine and asked with heavy meaning, "Who are you?"

"You've been waiting for me," I challenged. "Don't you already know my name?" I loved to watch performers who claimed clairvoyance to see how they responded to someone who didn't fully buy their act on the first try. I had a feeling that this old-timer would handle my small challenge with ease.

What I didn't expect was her response.

"I might not know your name, but the first time I saw you, I thought I recognized a kindred soul. You remind me so much of myself."

My breath caught at the way her gaze intensified even more, as though she would discover every one of my secrets just by looking into my eyes.

"But," she said, holding up one finger, "your name is not what I asked for. I want to know *who you are*."

"You already know," I said. If she'd seen me before, then she knew my act. But did she know me as the Starling? Or the Wolfe girl?

She shook her head. "I'm not interested in your family or your origin." Garnet tapped her fingers over her heart. "Who are you? Down in the very core of your being. Can you tell me that?"

Who was I? Well...I knew who I wanted to be. I knew who I'd been before. I knew I wanted to feel loved and wanted. But did I really know

who I was at the core of my being? "I don't know," I admitted in a bare whisper as the truth of it washed over me.

She kept hold of my right hand and placed her other hand on my shoulder. "That's what you're meant to find out. You see, I saw you years ago, and even then, I recognized you as a like soul to mine. You and me, we are a special breed. We are meant to be wild and free. We are meant to run with wolves."

I blinked, hardly believing that her mentioning wolves was a coincidence. And yet, I was intimately familiar with the story of the wolf mother, so perhaps this was just another version of that story. Maybe she didn't truly know me and was just using folklore and good storytelling to draw me in. Yet, she claimed to have seen me before, and she spoke of wolves.

She must have seen my recognition of the term, because she asked, "You know the wolf woman?"

"She gathers bones," I said, guessing that we spoke of the same tale.

She nodded. "And so do you."

I shook my head. "I'm not the mother of wolves."

She smiled kindly. "You are more than you know."

"You spoke of the first time you saw me. When was that?" Had she seen me perform with my brothers? Did she know the wolf wagon?

"It was in Duskmoor, two years past. You sang with such spirit. I knew then what you were—a wolf woman like me."

I shook my head harder. "I don't gather bones. I don't put people back together. I'm not a wolf mother." How could I be when my own mother hadn't been able to stay and teach me?

"Ah," she said, holding up a finger, then placing it on my palm and tracing one of the lines. "We don't just gather for others. We don't just sing for others. The wolf woman—the mother of wolves as you call her—she was once like us. She learned to gather bones, she learned how to put them back together. And we too can learn such a thing. We can learn to repair things that have been torn apart. With enough wisdom, we can make things whole again. But," she said, holding up one finger for emphasis, "you must remember to gather *yourself* first."

The profundity of her statement struck me so hard that tears burned my eyes.

"Build your own skeleton first. It will take time." She cradled my cheek and I felt comforted instead of discomfited. "You've been torn apart." She said the words as if she were looking into my soul. "And your pieces have been tossed here and there by those who should have held you together."

A tear slipped past my lashes.

"But bones are hard. They're resilient. You just need to gather them up." She tilted her head down a little, nodding her head until I found myself nodding along with her. "And when you've found all of your pieces and gathered them up, you must sing over them."

"Sing them to life?" I asked, knowing that's what the mother of wolves was fabled to do, but also knowing it was too lofty a goal for me.

She nodded vigorously and placed her fingers at my throat. "You know how to sing for others, but what is *your* song? The song you sing only to yourself? What is the melody of your soul and the harmony of your heart? Find your song—your woman's song, your mother song. Sing *that*, and those bones, those pieces of yourself, they'll become alive again."

I was desperate to understand what she was saying, and she must have seen my confusion, because she kept going.

"Our soul needs to sing, but before we can sing with our soul, we must *listen* with our soul."

I knew immediately that I wanted that, that I needed it. "How?"

"Practice. Be still and learn to listen to your own voice. Stop imagining what others want for you or demand of you. Stop trying to make yourself into someone else's dream. Listen to you—all of you. If you can do that, you'll remember the things you knew as a child, before the world broke you apart."

I was crying in earnest now, and her face held no theatrical mask or dramatic flare. It held compassion and understanding. "Sing yourself back to life," she said. "Be wild. Run free."

I longed for her words to be true. They resonated within me, begging me to find a way to listen to my soul, to know myself. Her eyes were genuine and hopeful, like she believed I could be that mythical wolf mother. "I don't know if I'm strong enough," I confessed. "It's so hard to do it all by myself."

"Ah," she said in her sage way. "Running free doesn't have to mean running alone. Wolves run in packs, my dear. Who will run at your side? Who will lead when you need it and follow when you know the better way?"

I blinked as Robert's face flashed through my mind, and then Hatcher's. "I don't know."

She smiled with kindness in her eyes. "You can work it out. You can unearth that part of yourself." She dropped her hands.

I sniffed and brushed at my cheeks, suddenly embarrassed. I dug into my pouch and offered her a bit, feeling deep down that her words were worth more than I could ever repay. "Thank you," I said.

But she shook her head, not accepting my money. "All I ask is that once you know, once you've started giving heed to the voice of your soul, and gone to meet her, you come back and tell me. All right?"

I nodded, taking two reluctant steps back.

"Go on," she encouraged. "Feel what it's like to run free."

I walked away in a daze, my mind tumbling end over end. I'd believed that by leaving the Hatchers and striking out on my own, that I was running free. But these past few days hadn't felt like freedom. They'd felt like drudgery. What did that mean? Did it mean I needed to hurry to Robert and find an adventure with him? Or would that be just as unsatisfying as my current predicament?

I didn't know, and I had a feeling I wouldn't know until I found him.

Maddox

I worked like a madman for that week as my father and I expanded the shop. We'd needed to do it for years, but the months that were dry enough for this sort of construction were the ones filled with festivals and traveling. So we'd decided to skip our trip to Faehurst, get the work done all at once, and then rejoin the other travelers in Winhaven.

I had been looking forward to this time. Time to be here at home. Time to work alongside not only my family, but Elise as well. Yes, I'd planned to work hard, but it was supposed to be enjoyable work, work where I could talk with Elise and tease her. I was supposed to know she was safe and well because she was with me.

Her departure was something I couldn't make sense of. Why had she gone? I knew she had feelings for Robert; that was more than obvious, but her insistence that she go after him was out of character. It didn't seem like a decision she would make. Had she changed and I hadn't noticed? Had

Robert rubbed off on her, making her think that a frantic search for excitement was what she wanted?

Elise loved mending by the fire for hours a day over the winter. She loved quiet dinners. She loved it when my father would read to us in the evening. Once she'd settled into her life with us, she had been the picture of contentment. Yes, she liked to have a new costume. She loved to travel and perform, but she always came back to sit at the fire and talk with us in the evening. She cherished that time...didn't she?

In the midst of my fear-fueled work, my father interrupted my brooding thoughts. "I've been thinking," he started.

I snorted. "Should I be worried?"

"Not at all. It's just that with Elise gone, I realized she won't be traveling to Winhaven with us."

"And?" I asked, my voice more brusque than I intended.

"And I wonder if you could travel to Winhaven on your own?"

I put down the mallet I'd been using to pound the beam into place and looked at him. "Go on my own?"

He nodded. "You're responsible enough, and certainly old enough. I would have sent you on your own before now, but you and Elise traveling on your own together..." He lifted a shoulder. "I didn't think it was a good idea."

"So you've been traveling with me just to be a chaperone?" I wasn't sure if I should feel grateful or insulted. Or perhaps I should just feel like a fool for not having realized what he was doing.

He gave an unconcerned shrug. "Not only for that reason, but that's been part of it."

I let out an annoyed sigh. "And how long did you intend to do that?"

He studied me for several moments, then admitted. "Honestly, I expected the two of you to be married by now."

I choked on air.

He smiled, but it was a little sad. "Don't look so surprised."

"She's not—" I tried to deny it, but the lie wouldn't come.

He shrugged.

"She doesn't want me," I said, just in case he had missed that fact.

"Maybe," he conceded. "Or maybe she just needs to know it's an option."

"I tried to tell her," I admitted, needing to say it out loud to someone.

"Before she left, I tried to make her understand."

"And did she?"

I shook my head.

"Then maybe you didn't try hard enough," he suggested gently.

"I know." I'd been kicking myself for not saying more. "But what can I do? Do you expect me to just walk up to her when she comes back and ask her to marry me?"

"No, but a little more honesty about your feelings would be good."

"What if she doesn't—"

"Maddox," he said, his voice sterner than usual. "Do you really want to watch her find someone else?"

I shook my head violently. "No, of course not." The idea burned.

"Then what have you got to lose?"

I stared out into the street, then finally confessed my most pressing fear. "What if she never comes back?"

"You'll just have to have faith that she will. I've watched her with that White fellow. I can't believe that such a man is really what she wants."

I blew out a breath. "I really hope you're right, Dad."

He clapped me on the shoulder and we both got back to work.

By the time the sun was setting and we packed up our tools, I knew that he was right. If I had any chance of having Elise return my feelings, I would have to tell her.

Elise

Working in Stormbrook on my own was a rude awakening. I didn't like it. I missed being with the Hatchers. I missed the chance to change my costumes whenever the whim struck me. I missed tramping about with Robert, finding adventure and waiting to see what he would do or say next. I missed speaking with Hatch. Aside from the one fascinating encounter with Garnet, the entire week in Stormbrook had been arduous, because I was just...waiting.

By the end of it, I was quite disillusioned with this quest I'd gone on, but I had to hold on to the hope that once I found Robert, it would all be worth it. True happiness required work and risk, right? I had to dig down into the earth and find the courage in my bones. So at the end of the week, I helped the Pruetts pack up their stall and we traveled to Lorta, where I was determined to find Robert and discover, once and for all, if he and I could be brave together.

The idea of being like the mother of wolves continued to hum through me, especially as we traveled toward Lorta. I had never thought to aspire to such a thing, because it was only a folk tale, a story of magic and abilities beyond the human. But the way that Garnet had spoken of it seemed attainable, almost inevitable. Did we all have a deeper, greater self inside us? One with intuition and bravery and the kind of self-possession that makes one stand tall and walk through life with both confidence and deep compassion? What a fantastical idea, and yet it filled my chest with hope and longing. I longed to know that part of myself.

Yet the more I thought of myself in that light, and the more I thought of the journey I was on right now, the more disheartened I became. Most of what I felt toward Robert was hurt and frustration. He'd abandoned me one moment, and then asked me to chase after him the next. Was that fair to me? Just the fact that I was asking that question was a testament to how much Garnet's words had affected me. I rarely considered what I deserved, but as I thought on it, I came to the tentative conclusion that I deserved to be treated better than that.

Still, Robert was a part of my past that I longed to repair. If someone from my childhood could love me the way I'd needed to be loved all those years, surely that would fix some of my broken parts. Wouldn't it? I had to try. I had to give Robert the chance, and perhaps once he knew how much effort I was willing to give to our potential future, he'd be confident enough to reciprocate. If we could both be honest, maybe we'd be able to find each other's broken pieces and put them back together. Maybe he'd be so excited to see me that he would apologize for leaving, and tell me all the things I longed to hear. Maybe he'd trust me with his own torn-up parts.

If he didn't...and I hated to admit just how real a possibility that was...

Well. I'd go back to Dressle. I'd go back to the family that had taken me in. My love and appreciation for them had swelled and expanded with each day I'd been away from them, especially when I realized how much they had repaired me. I'd come to them as such a small portion of my true self, and because of their acceptance and friendship, I was nearly a full person now. With that realization, I started to wonder if I'd been terribly unfair to them. They'd told me countless times that they cared for me and didn't think me a burden. But I hadn't believed them.

Shame filled me at the thought, realizing I'd essentially accused them of lying to me for years. I owed them all a tremendous apology, and it saddened me that I couldn't give it to them now.

All I could do at the moment was focus on finding Robert and trying my best to tell him the truth of my feelings.

If only I knew what those feelings were. They'd shifted and warped over the past week, and the closer I came to finding him, the less confident I was in them. Yet I had to see it through.

We arrived in Lorta on Sunday evening, and I resisted the urge to run off and find him, instead choosing to show my appreciation to the Pruetts by helping them unpack and set up. I even helped Mrs. Pruett make dinner and then stayed to take my meal with them.

It was close to sunset when we'd cleaned up. I ran off, determined to thoroughly search the festival grounds before the light became too dim.

Only a handful of the vendors were still setting up, having arrived this afternoon as we had. But by the time I made my way through all the tents, most had settled around fires, content to spend a relaxing evening before the hustle started in the morning.

I stopped at each fire, trying to inconspicuously see everyone's faces. I thought of asking everyone I saw if they knew where Robert was, but I couldn't bring myself to attract that much attention to myself, and after making my way around the grounds more than twice, I gave up and went to join the Pruetts at their fire.

When I resumed my search in the morning, I was more hopeful. Sunlight made searching so much easier. I had donned my costume, hoping to appear as if I were only looking for a spot to perform. I saw Garnet busily organizing trinkets and potions with the help of a young girl. She didn't see me and I hurried past, knowing that I did not have the answer to her question yet. I didn't know who I was. I hadn't found my song yet.

I'd been trying to remember the words my mother had used to describe the wolf mother and put those to music, but they wouldn't come. The melody eluded me, and the more I tried to think of the exact words she had used, the more they jumbled in my mind.

I needed to find Robert. No matter what he said or how he reacted when I found him, I knew that I wouldn't find the answers I needed until I saw him again. So I searched the fair, finally running into a leatherworker I knew and asking him if he'd seen White, the magician.

"I saw him earlier, entertaining some young boys. He headed that way."

My heart leapt and I thanked him profusely before rushing off. He was here. He hadn't hurried off yet, and if only I could find him, we would finally, *finally* be able to come to understand each other.

I rushed past the fire breathers and the spice seller, ducked around jugglers and threaded my way through the crowds, all the while searching for his familiar bright vest and tall hat.

A round of female laughter caught my attention, and when I located the ring of young women, Robert was at their center.

I let out a relieved sigh. I'd found him. Finally.

I approached at a slower pace, content to watch him as he performed. It wasn't a surprise to see him flirting with the girls. Festival rats knew when to use intrigue and when to use outright flattery or flirtation. Then another girl joined the group. A girl in a bright red cloak. I stared, wondering if it

was the girl who had saved me. The way I'd seen her in Murrwood was vivid in my mind because in so many ways, she was just like me. And yet, she'd had friends who she could rely on. Then again...so did I. Hatch, Kat. All of the Hatchers. I had that now.

I drew closer, hoping that if it was her, we could talk for a moment, but when she turned her face toward me, I could see it wasn't her. I tried not to be too disappointed, returning my attention to Robert, but the closer I watched, the more I frowned. His movements and mannerisms were familiar—too familiar. My heart sank with the realization that the way he treated all of these girls was the same way he interacted with me. He pretended to pull a coin from behind one girl's ear, skimming her cheek with his fingers and making her blush. When he gave one of them a fright, he apologized by taking her hand and kissing her knuckles. I tilted my head, watching more closely, and the more I watched, the more annoyed I became. Did he ever stop acting? Had he ever stopped acting with me?

All his flirtatious looks and charming teasing had convinced me that he held me in high regard. But he had never looked at me with any true feeling. I'd been so desperate for someone from my past to tell me that what I was—who I was—had value, and that desperation had made me ignore all of Robert's insincerity.

My shoulders sank in disappointment. Robert finished showing them his tricks, and the girls dropped a coin or two into his hand. He gave an elaborate bow, kissed the backs of their hands, and sent them off. Then he grinned and walked away, looking pleased with himself.

How clearly I could imagine him doing exactly that when he'd left me behind in Murrwood, and I suddenly felt like the most ridiculous fool that ever walked the earth. He had never really cared for me, not the way I wanted him to. That was suddenly, painfully obvious. If he had cared for me as more than a friend—or even as only a friend—he wouldn't have left without a word. He wouldn't have goaded me into chasing after him and putting myself in danger. What had I been thinking? Had I truly believed that my sudden appearance would make him magically consider my feelings as well as his own? His behavior suddenly seemed so blatantly selfish that I berated myself for not seeing it before.

I caught sight of the girl in the red cloak again, and as I thought back to Murrwood when I'd seen the girl in the scarlet cloak with her husband and baby, I could clearly recall the way her husband had looked at her. It was

the same look that Hatcher had given me. When he'd said "Don't go." When he'd told me he didn't want to cage me.

The old fantasy of running to Robert and being swept into his arms was no longer appealing. In fact, it left a rather bitter taste in my mouth just thinking about it—as did the shame. My behavior suddenly seemed all too shameful. The Hatchers had stood by me. They'd provided me with a home...and I'd rejected it.

As that shame and disappointment set in, the only thing I wanted...was Hatcher. He cared for me—truly cared, and I knew he would listen and try to understand no matter how tangled my thoughts were. He would be honest and supportive. The need to be with him grew, as did the reality that I couldn't be, and the ache I felt at not being able to go to him was so much worse than any pain I'd felt at Robert's abandonment. It was so much more crushing than what I felt watching Robert flirting with every girl in sight and being completely happy without me. That was more of a simple irritation. It hurt my feelings and my pride, but it didn't go deeper than that.

But this sudden, throbbing need to be with Hatcher—it cut deep, and as I stood there and studied my knotted feeling, it only grew. It expanded out and was soon joined by the feelings I'd pushed down so long ago. The girlhood crush that I'd doused in those first months of knowing Hatcher was suddenly bright and burning—and so much bigger and deeper than it used to be.

The more I thought about it and felt it, the clearer it became. Robert was exciting and unpredictable, running from one thing to the next. I had thought that appealed to me, that that was what true freedom looked like. I'd thought that was what I was *supposed* to want.

But as I dug down, trying to unearth my true wants and needs, I realized that freedom and security weren't opposites. And the calm stability that Hatcher had given me without my ever having to ask for it...

He had given me freedom.

In all his steady support and calm faith, he'd encouraged me to find myself. He had valued *me* just as I was. And if I could just accept that, perhaps I would be able to run free. Maybe that's who I was meant to be. Maybe down at my very core, I wasn't just my past and I wasn't just what I wished to be. Maybe down at my core, I was all of it. I was the foolishness and the bravery. I was the love and the fear. I was the stubbornness. And I could be the one who made Hatcher happy. If only I hadn't so foolishly run

off and put so much distance between us, I could have started this day, this very hour, to show him how much he meant to me.

As the truth of my feeling and the words to go along with it settled over me, a tear coursed down my cheek and I had to swallow. "I'm Elise Wolfe," I whispered to myself, "and I love Hatcher."

I turned and ran, heading to where I'd seen Garnet. I had to tell her what I now knew. I ran up to her stall, arriving out of breath and no doubt looking wild. She looked up and grinned when she saw me approach.

I came to stand before her, but I didn't say anything as I tried to calm my racing heart. The realization and the words seemed too big, too monumental to be spoken to anyone.

But Garnet's smile was full and soft and encouraging. "Tell me, child. Who are you?"

"I am a wild woman, but I'm also a Wolfe woman," I admitted, claiming my family name. "And that's okay. I'm stubborn and determined. I'm a daughter mourning her parents and a sister who stood up for herself." I swallowed as I accepted just how much bravery that had taken. "I'm a performer and a helper. But most of all"—my breath hitched and I wanted to laugh or cry or both—"I am in love with my very best friend. I love Hatcher."

She smiled and her eyes brimmed with tears as she reached out a hand to me, squeezing my fingers in her own. "It is good to know where you've come from, and even better to know where you are going."

I chuckled. "But I've been so unfair to him, and I don't know where I'm going."

"Up," she answered. "You're going into the light. You've hidden your wolfish nature for so long that you're buried by all the mounds of dirt you've piled on to protect yourself. Stop trying to dig down when you should be climbing up toward the light. You've been underground for too long. It's time to find your way to the surface."

I blinked away tears as her words pieced my heart. "But how do I climb up? How do I even know what up is?" I asked, heartbroken that I'd spent so much time not appreciating all that the Hatchers had given me.

"Trust your intuition, and act out of love," she said with a confidence that I trusted. "Love, when it is real, will guide you into the light. You, my wild girl, are destined to live topside."

Her words rang in my head, turning over and over, echoing into every corner of my mind. I'd been underground for too long. Had I truly hidden myself out of fear? Had my brothers buried me with each injury and insult? Or had I burrowed deep in the earth myself, believing I would find my mother there? If I were being honest, the answer was likely a combination of all three. There had been times when I'd been with my brothers that I had closed my eyes at night, wishing I wouldn't wake up so that I could be with my mother again. There were countless times I'd tried to stand up for myself, reaching for the light, only to have Daggon or Morley push me back into the dark.

So if I wanted to do as Garnet had said, if I wanted to live topside, I had to choose it. I had to gather the bones of who I wanted to be, and I needed to find a way to sing them to life. "I'm in love with Hatcher," I repeated, knowing that was a truth I could hold on to.

"And when do you plan to tell him as much?"

I laughed. "As soon as I can get to Winhaven and find him, I suppose." She nodded. "Now you know where you are going, and you may tell me your name."

"I'm Elise Wolfe," I said, smiling brightly through my tears.

She looked shocked by my confession, leading me to believe that she truly hadn't known who I was. But I didn't have time to talk about that now. She was right. If I was going to live topside, I had to start moving. I reached out and squeezed her hand. "Thank you, Garnet," I said, then dropped her hand and ran.

Could I leave now? Could I find my way to Winhaven on my own? I'd never traveled the road from Lorta to Winhaven. Not many did. The road that ran along the cliffs between the mountain and the sea was so winding that few ventured on it with wagons.

But I didn't have a wagon.

And if I was by the sea, and not traversing mountain passes...I could travel that road alone, couldn't I? I would have to be sure to get careful directions and watch my back, but I could do that. If it meant being with Hatcher in two days instead of two weeks, I could do that.

As I rushed through the tents, anxious to get my pack ready so that I could go, a hand caught my arm, pulling me to a halt.

My heart jumped into my throat and my fist clenched, ready to fight off my assailant.

Until I recognized Robert and his grin. "Well, I'll be," he said with a satisfied smirk. Then he pulled out his watch and glanced at it before looking back at me with a cheeky lift of his brow. "A bit late, aren't you?"

I let out a breathy laugh. "Actually, I was just passing through."

He laughed. "Sure you were. Come on, I'll show you the best acts." His hand slid down to encase my own and he started to walk off, towing me behind him.

I pulled him to a halt, rather forcefully extracting my hand. "I wasn't joking, Robert. I need to leave."

He studied me for several seconds before deciding I was telling the truth. Then he frowned and shook his head. "I don't understand. I thought..." He tipped a finger toward me, then back at himself, then at me again. "Why did you come here?"

I shrugged. "It was a mistake, or rather..." It hadn't been a mistake. Coming here had taught me something I would not have realized otherwise. "I thought maybe I'd be more content if I chased some adventure."

He grinned. "I've rubbed off on you, haven't I?"

"Perhaps," I conceded, though I no longer saw that as a good thing. "But, being here by myself..." I shrugged. "It actually gave me a lot of clarity."

He stepped closer, crowding me a little. "But you're not here by yourself."

I frowned. I didn't like his pushiness. Had he been this way before? I supposed he had, but before I'd found it flattering. Now it was just... uncomfortable.

"I suppose, but...honestly, I don't think adventure for the sake of adventure is what I want." I needed a change of subject. "Have you met Garnet?" I asked.

"The old caterpillar? Yes, I've encountered her a time or two."

"Old caterpillar?"

"Didn't you notice the caterpillars in her crown of leaves? I don't know how she manages it, but those caterpillars will cocoon themselves right on the branches of that headpiece and emerge as butterflies."

What a fantastical thought. "That's amazing."

"It's eerie is what it is."

"I thought she was remarkable," I commented in all sincerity.

He gave a dismissive shrug. "Just tricks and gibberish."

I frowned, not liking the way he was talking about Garnet. "Like your act? Isn't that what magic is? Tricks and gibberish?"

I saw a true frown on him for the first time as he looked me up and down. "What's gotten into you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You just insulted me."

"And you just insulted Garnet, a woman I just told you I admire."

He continued to look perplexed. "Are you aspiring to be a hag?"

His insult hit my heart, but as I thought through it, it gave me strength and I answered, "Yes."

He looked even more confused, blustering for words for several moments before I cut him off.

"A hag is only another name for an old woman. A woman who has lived and mothered and experienced. A woman who's gained wisdom the hard way. So, yes, Robert White, a hag is exactly what I aspire to be."

I turned and walked away, feeling very brave and independent.

At least until he caught up with me. "Now, don't be like that."

"Like what?"

"Don't go off in a huff. We're friends, aren't we?"

Were we? I was honestly doubting that assertion at the moment. But perhaps that was unfair. "Yes, of course we are." It was not his fault I had invented feelings between us that weren't real. Still, he'd left me that riddle. He'd asked me to come. "And because we're friends, I have to ask, why did you leave without saying something to me?"

"I left you a message."

"That's not the same. If you wanted to keep spending time together, why didn't you come to Dressle?"

He rocked back on one foot and pushed a hand through his hair. "I couldn't go to Dressle."

"Why?" I was tired of his vague, unsatisfying answers.

"When I was there in the spring, there was a...misunderstanding."

"What kind of misunderstanding?"

"A shop owner noticed something missing, and since I was close at hand, he thought I'd done it. He was *adamant* that I'd done it. To have someone to blame for something like that..." He shook his head. "I couldn't go back to a place where I've been unfairly accused of thievery, could I?"

For a minute, I wondered if he really had stolen it, but he seemed genuinely upset by the situation. And I remembered how affronted he'd looked the one time I suggested that he was looking for marks. No, Robert wasn't a thief, and I could understand why he wouldn't return to a place where that's what they thought of him. "You could have just told me that. Said a proper farewell."

"You're right," he said, looking contrite. "I should have, but I was antsy and ready to be on the move again."

"And yet you didn't stay in Stormbrook for the festival."

He grinned. "That's because when I was in Stormbrook the week before the festival, I realized how lucrative such a thing can be for a lone performer. Everyone is looking forward to the festival, waiting for it, which means they're thrilled to see a magician a week early."

He looked so proud of himself, and I wondered just how lucrative his need to wander had been. Then I was annoyed that he had left me a riddle, daring me to follow him, and then not shown the courtesy of waiting for me. I was about to point out just that when I remembered it didn't matter. In fact, I was grateful he hadn't been there, because it had allowed me the time and space to realize the truth of who I was, and who he was. So instead I set aside my annoyance and just said, "I'm glad it worked out for you."

He looked relieved. "So tell me what's going on. You came all the way here and now you want to leave? Back to Dressle?"

"No, to Winhaven."

"Winhaven?" He was clearly surprised, but then he nodded. "Well, that's fine. It might be fun to split the week between here and Winhaven. And you don't want to travel on your own. Wait two days and we can travel together."

Two days. I didn't want to wait two days. But then I was also anxious about traveling by myself. Walking with the Pruetts had been bad enough. Still, two days seemed like a long time now that I knew my feelings, now that I recognized the awful ache inside of me that I suspected would only go away once I was with Hatcher again.

"Don't you want to rest for a while?" he pointed out. "Sing for a while?" He had a point. I'd fully intended to stay out the week here, earning money for the journey back to Dressle. I didn't know that I had enough supplies to get to Winhaven if I didn't put in at least a day's work.

I was starting to feel foolish. I'd gone off seeking adventure with White, only to decide that Hatcher was who I really wanted, and now I planned to go chasing after him without a plan or proper funds.

I took a deep breath. Clearly I needed to slow down and clear my head before diving headlong into anything.

I stayed, but only for one day. I sang my heart out to earn enough so that I could load my pack with food and take the road to Winhaven.

I didn't tell Robert that I was going. Something about Robert made me squeamish, and I could no longer say that I really trusted him. So I set off on my own, following along the cliffs that fell off into the ocean. I'd never seen so much water before. The vastness of the Alayan Sea stretched to the horizon, rising and falling with great power and tremendous breath.

When night started to settle over me, I realized there were no protective trees to shelter under, just the wide expanse of the ragged cliffs. Though I could see far in every direction, the roar of the ocean would make it almost impossible to hear someone approaching while I slept. Unease crept into my gut and my eyes darted around wildly, looking for any sort of protection. I kept walking, my eyes peeled for any outcropping of rock that might be big enough for me to lie down behind.

I had passed only three other travelers during the day, each walking on their own with a heavy pack on their back. I'd given each a wide berth, choosing to walk nearer the cliff's edge rather than directly on the path. None had given me a second look.

It was nearly dark when I found a large boulder rising out of the cliff that had a nice crevice behind it. I built my fire against the rock, grateful that the only animals likely to be near were sea birds.

I sat stiff by my fire at first, worrying about what the night would bring. Worrying that it would take longer to get to Winhaven than I expected. What if I missed Marshall and Hatcher? What if they'd decided to skip Winhaven just like they had skipped Faehurst? If I was left to travel from Winhaven to Dressle on my own...The prospect made my gut clench.

I had to remind myself that Hatcher wasn't like Robert. Hatcher was reliable. If he planned to go to Winhaven, then that's where he would be. I

fixated on all that I knew of Hatcher's character, and as I watched the flames shuddering in the constant breeze, I started to relax.

The waves roared and the clear sky sparkled with more stars than I'd ever been able to see before, and with that blanket of stars, I let myself remember the comfort of sleeping under the stars in my mother's loving arms. I thought over all that Garnet had taught me and all that I'd started to remember about the mother of wolves. I tried again to remember the exact words my mother had used when telling the story, hoping that somehow I could weave some of her words into my own song.

I fell asleep with the memory of my own mother's love wrapped around me.

A scuffle woke me.

My eyes popped open, but I didn't move. Instead I just looked around me from where I lay on my side against the boulder. The sky was starting to pink, reflected in the ocean. The scuffle and grunting came again and my heart nearly stopped. I stayed still, but the noise never came closer or became more menacing; it was just there, somewhere close by.

I slowly pushed myself up to sitting, turning this way and that, seeing nothing but continuing to hear it. I kept my cloak tightly wrapped around me as I stood and moved to the edge of the boulder so that I could see around it to the path.

There in the early dawn light, four wolf cubs pranced and played with their mother. She lunged and ran and came back again, encouraging them to chase after her.

I was terrified and fascinated. From what I knew of wolves, a mother was likely to avoid humans unless they attacked her or her cubs. So I crouched and I watched, entranced.

This felt like more than coincidence. It felt like fate, or a sign. After all the stories my mother had told me about the mother of wolves, and after the revelation of Garnet's words and the strength I'd found to embrace my own wolfish self, this felt almost inevitable. Of course a wolf would come to show me that I was on the right path. That sounded silly and unlikely, but I didn't care. That was what it meant to me. I continued to watch them as the dim early dawn became the piercing rays of sunrise. I'd become so enchanted with watching their games that when I looked to the mother wolf and saw her looking back, her eyes fixed on mine, I wasn't afraid. I mean you no harm, I chanted in my head, hoping she would sense my intent. I

mean you no harm. She stilled for a moment and then, seeming to decide I was no threat, she rounded up her pups, chasing and being chased, until she finally led them out of sight.

Perhaps they were going back to their den. Maybe they were just beginning a hunt. Either way, the encounter made me braver than before, and I set off with new energy and a burning determination in my heart.

As I walked, I started pulling out my mother's words, the ones I'd tried so hard to remember last night, and I put them to a tune.

In my solitude, I was able to sing my song out loud, over and over until it all made sense and flowed together. The tune was slow and smooth, the notes in the lower register of my voice. It was a hypnotic melody, one that would only catch the attention of those willing to stop and listen.

Where the sun beats down on the desert place Where the moon creates shadows in empty space There on desolate ground, you'll find her With silver fur that streaks and lines her

She digs at the earth
Discovering the bones
Of the person she was
And the love that she owns

This is the wild mother She will protect the other The one who's lost her way The one who wishes to stay

She learned to heal by trial
Walking each craggy mile
She teaches the song to her children
The notes that will soothe and fill them

This is the wild mother She will protect all others Singing the lost souls home Singing life to their bones I sang and I walked, and my journey, though entirely solitary, did not trudge by. The steady beat of the ocean and the constant wind in my hair and skirts pushed me along, and for the first time I felt that I was choosing to walk toward something—someone. The ocean showed me what freedom was. In its ebbing and flowing I saw the way that beauty and rhythm worked with the chaos, and I tried to breathe it in. I breathed in my truths. The ones I was proud of as well as the ones that brought me shame. They were all a part of me. And with each step I took that drew me closer to Winhaven, I learned to accept all of those truths.

In the end, the journey did not feel like drudgery, because I knew where I was going and who I was going to. Most importantly, I knew who I was.

Elise

I arrived at Winhaven Wednesday afternoon and made my way through the streets. I could see the colorful banners and striped tents of the festival dotting the hillside above the village. Atop that hill sat the castle of the Sovereign Duke and Duchess of Winberg. Winhaven was situated at the Northern tip of Winberg and, like Lorta, always held their fair during the last week of the festival season. That meant that by the time we made it this far north, the harvest was well past. It was the time we pulled out our furs and shortened our days along with the sun. The trek and the cold were always worth it, though, because the citizens of Winhaven were well off. Peopled with more noble families than any other part of the dukedom, the lush lands housed countless estates, worked by thousands of common folk. Winhaven was prosperous.

And all of us festival rats tried not to be envious of the easy living that its inhabitants seemed to enjoy.

A river separated the village proper from the castle hill, and as I crossed the bridge, I was impressed by the lovely decorations. Bouquets of white roses tied with red ribbons were fixed to each pillar along the way. So it was curious indeed when I reached the middle of the bridge and saw at least five men all dressed in the black, white, and red livery of the palace as they worked to remove the white flowers and tie bouquets of red roses in their place.

I looked more closely at the white roses, which didn't seem to be wilted or dying. "Excuse me," I said to the closest servant. "Might I ask why these white roses are being discarded?"

He only shrugged. "The duchess insisted on red," he declared loudly, and then mumbled under his breath, "Of course yesterday, she insisted on white, but—" He let out a huff of frustration, and I let him alone. I'd never thought much about what the duke and duchess were like, but the odd situation with the roses made me wonder if the duchess was perhaps fickle and difficult to please.

I continued over the bridge and wove through the tents. A sense of normalcy and comfort washed over me as I heard the shouts of those selling their wares and the instruments being played as minstrels walked along, singing their stories.

I found the Hatchers' tent easily enough, the sign reading Hatcher Hats and Costumes prominently displayed above the doors. My step quickened as I reached one of the open sides and ducked inside. "Hatcher!" I called out, expecting to see him sitting at his workstation with a project in hand.

Instead I found Marshall at the table, his customary pot of tea at his elbow. "Oh, hello, Marshall," I said, dropping my pack to the floor.

"Elise," he said in surprise, springing to his feet. "What are you doing here?" He circled the work table and pulled me into a one-armed hug. "Shouldn't you be in Lorta?"

"I was, but I changed my mind."

His face morphed into a grin. "I'm so glad you're here. How did you travel here, and with whom?"

"I stayed with the Pruetts until Lorta, but then I decided I needed to be here."

His brow furrowed with concern. "So you came from Lorta on your own?"

"Yes."

Concern marred his features. "I've never traveled that road. Were you in danger?"

I shook my head. I'd been so confident in my decision to come here that the risk had seemed minimal and even my encounter with the family of wolves had been pleasant. "It was beautiful." And I wasn't speaking only of the scenery. "I'm hoping I can travel back to Dressle with you."

He reached out again to wrap me in a fatherly hug. "I'm relieved you'll be with us. We've worried over you quite a bit."

"Thank you." I pulled back and asked what I really wanted to know. "Where is Hatcher?"

"I told him to go enjoy the festival for a while. He seemed melancholy."

"Melancholy?" I asked, immediately concerned for Hatcher's well-being. He was only melancholy when he had good reason. "Why?"

Marshall looked over his glasses at me as he sat back at his table. "I suppose I can tell you my suspicions, so long as you understand they're only my suspicions."

"What suspicions?" I suddenly remembered that Hatcher had mentioned a girl who had caught his attention. Was he missing her?

"I think he's been missing you, my dear."

The immediate effect of those words nearly knocked me over. Did he mean that Hatcher had been missing me in the same way that I'd been missing him? "Missing me?"

He nodded. "Is that so hard to believe? You've spent nearly every day together over the past three years. He's used to your company."

The hope that had burst inside me snuffed out. "Oh. Is that all?"

Marshall gave me a confused look. "Don't underestimate the power of being comfortable with another person. Especially if not being with them leaves a hole in your soul."

His words settled comfortably into my new awareness. It was another bone to be gathered. Excitement was all well and good, but if I only wanted the excitement of love, how quickly would that run out? I wanted something lasting.

I wanted a love that bloomed and changed year round. I wanted love that started as lush green and then turned into stunning orange and red before settling into quiet white and calm brown, and then bursting forth in bright green buds. I wanted clear streams and rivers to flow through my love. I wanted shade and dappled sunlight, the quiet, constant chirping of birds and the hush of snowfall. I wanted a love that was *alive*, one where I could live topside, being entirely myself, as Garnet had advised me to do. Not one where I had to go crawling into rabbit holes and foxes' dens chasing after a man who was never content with the moment he was living in.

"You're welcome to wait for him here," Marshall offered, pulling me from my swirling hopes. "He's been coming back to check on me throughout the day, afraid I can't run my own business."

I smiled, knowing full well how much ownership Hatcher felt for the business. He cared deeply about its success, not only because he wanted to please his father and make him proud, but because he was building a life for himself.

"Thank you. That's a good idea. I'll go ahead and sing out front if you don't mind."

He grinned. "It's what I was hoping for."

I used the back corner of the tent to change into my Starling apparel, then planted myself at the outside corner of the tent and started singing.

As usual, I sank into the songs. They soothed my nerves and made the time pass more quickly, though I still scanned the crowds continually, looking for Hatcher, trying to keep the butterflies in my stomach from rioting too much.

I was on my seventh song and had collected four bits and one copper when I spotted him. His steps were hurried and he was trying to look above the heads of the crowd, clearly looking for something.

And then his eyes fell on me.

My heart melted, because by the way he smiled, his eyes lighting up, I knew that I was the thing he had been looking for. He'd heard my voice and come to find me.

A grin split my own face, which was bad timing since I was in the middle of a song about the angry words spoken between a bridge troll and the river he lived in. I kept singing, trying to get my expression to fit the song instead of the frantic excitement of my heart.

Hatcher smirked, happy to have caught me messing up a song, and on his behalf, no less. His strides were long and he continued, but less hurried. The ridiculous, fanciful side of me imagined him sweeping me into his arms and kissing me deeply the moment he reached me.

Oh, please let my ridiculous fantasy come true, I begged the heavens.

But then Hatcher's gaze shifted, and whatever had caught his eyes transformed his face into surprise and stopped his feet. He stood still and gaped.

My gaze shot to my right, searching for whatever had surprised him.

My voice followed the example of Hatcher's feet and stopped suddenly, the notes fading quickly amongst the excited whispers of the surrounding crowd.

The couple entering the clearing in front of the tent, trailed by guards and arrayed in the grandest of fabrics and finery, could be none other than the Duke and Duchess of Winberg.

"Please," the duchess said, drawing closer with regal steps. "Do not stop on our account. I was enjoying your performance."

Nerves and excitement shot through me. The Sovereign Duchess of Winberg had just declared to a very large audience that she was enjoying my performance. Maybe she wasn't so hard to please after all.

Maddox

Shock was written on Elise's face. The duke and duchess had taken us all by surprise. Though I was familiar with the tradition of Their Graces hand-picking performers to join their banquet, I'd never actually been present for it. We didn't normally set up our tent so close to the performers, so this was new to me.

Elise looked completely frozen. I wished there was something I could do, but I dared not infringe on the moment.

I saw the smooth column on her throat convulse as she swallowed.

"Go on then, songbird," the duchess prompted in a tone that was almost kind, but not quite. "Finish your song."

Elise's hands quivered at her sides, but she stood up straight and took a deep breath. Her voice cracked on two notes when she sang the first phrase, her eyes pinching in frustration with each one. But she continued, and soon enough, her natural confidence returned and she was able to sing with her usual enchanting air.

I let her voice wash over me, grateful just to know she was here and she was well. I'd been driven to distraction, afraid her rash decision to chase after White had led her to harm, afraid she would find what she was looking for and decide to stay with him.

But she was here now. She'd come back. And as I watched her sing for the duke and duchess, immense pride filled me, puffing up my chest and making me want to take her hand and show her off to everyone.

She finished the song with her usual gusto and flair. There was fire in her eyes, and her heaving chest testified to the exertion required for such a passionate performance.

Everyone clapped, including the duchess. And when the applause had quieted, Her Grace turned to her husband. "I like this one," she said, then turned back to Elise. "You will come with us," she declared before resuming her walk, her hand resting regally on the arm of her husband.

Elise looked stunned, but in a good way. One of the liveried servants approached Elise, no doubt to make sure that she obeyed the duchess's

directive and made her way to the palace.

I caught my father's eye, worried that Elise would be swept off before I even spoke a word to her. Dad just pointed in her direction, as though the solution was obvious.

Perhaps it was. I moved quickly to her side.

"Now?" she asked the servant as I approached.

"Yes. Everything will be provided for you when you reach the palace. You will dine with the other performers at the banquet as you take turns performing for the duke and duchess and their court."

"But—"

I reached her side and put a hand to her waist, unable to resist the urge to touch her. "Elise."

She turned to me, and the relief and joy I saw on her face made my heart swell. She grabbed on to my other hand and turned to the servant. "Might I bring my betrothed?" she asked.

Though I knew we were not betrothed, having Elise refer to me as such gave me such a sense of pride and hope that I had to restrain myself from wrapping her in my arms and picking her up off the ground.

"Of course," the servant intoned. "It's only proper that your man escort you, but we must go now." He swept an arm in the direction the duke's entourage had gone.

Elise scooped up her nest of coins, pulling the strings closed and tying it to her belt before taking hold of my hand again. Her nerves practically hummed through her fingers where they clung to mine. As we followed after the crowd, I squeezed her hand in reassurance and she looked up at me, a genuine smile showing through her anxiety. "Hello," she said.

I chuckled. "Hello. You're here," I said in wonder.

She nodded. "Your father said you were wandering, so I was just singing while I waited for you."

"Just a moment's singing and now we're on our way to the palace," I said, bemused.

"Yes, it's very strange," she said through nervous laughter.

"Though, you'll have to remind me, because I can't recollect, when exactly did we become betrothed?" I teased, hoping to broach the subject without shattering the congeniality that existed between us. We had parted on very unstable terms, and the last thing I wanted was to go back to that

tension, but I couldn't just ignore the fact that she had claimed me in such a way.

She leaned her forehead into my shoulder, almost like she was embarrassed, which was intriguing. There wasn't much that embarrassed my Elise. Yes, I wanted her to be my Elise. Did her returning mean that was a possibility?

"What happened on your quest?"

She pulled in a deep breath. "I learned a great deal about myself."

"Really?" I asked, instantly intrigued. "I'd love to hear about that."

She looked up at me, her eyes smiling more than her mouth. "There's a lot I'd like to tell you, but first"—she glanced around us—"I think we'll have to get through this evening. Do they really wish me to perform in the palace?"

"It seems that way. Are you glad that you left Lorta?" *Say yes, say yes*, I chanted in my head. If she was happy she'd left Lorta, that would mean she was happy to leave Robert behind.

"Very," she said, her eyes fixed on me as we let the crowd around us guide our movements. "For more reasons than one."

"I know you were looking for something," I ventured. "Someone." I watched her face to gauge her reaction to the mention of Robert. "Did you find him? Robert?"

She glanced at me, then away, seeming embarrassed. "Yes, I did."

"But you left him behind?" My heartbeat pounded on my ribs, waiting for some definitive declaration. Say you left him behind on purpose. Say you came here for me.

"Yes, though I expect he'll arrive tomorrow," she said.

My heart plummeted and I released her hand. "Oh." All the hope slumped out of me, leaving me bereft. Why was she here, calling me her betrothed, if she knew Robert White was following her here? A flash fire of anger ignited in me and my jaw hardened.

She saw my drastic change of mood and sucked in a breath of worry. "No," she said, shaking her head. "No, not that he's the reason I came. He's not." She tucked her hair behind her ear and folded her arms, looking over her right shoulder in the way she did when she was nervous and didn't want to meet someone's gaze. Hope sprung anew. "I actually came to see you. I wanted to talk…"

She continued to look behind her, and her words drifted away. As I watched her profile, I saw the blood drain from her head, and the terror that morphed her features made my heart drop.

"No," she breathed just before turning back toward me, away from whatever she had seen that so frightened her. She tried to push past me, but I caught her, unwilling to let her out of my sight and worried that if she tried to run in such a state, she would collapse. I banded my arms around her and felt her fingers digging into the skin at my back. Her breathing was rushed and heavy, making my concern grow even more. I didn't believe I'd ever seen her so frightened.

"What is it? What's wrong?" I asked as I held her tight, lending her all my strength.

Elise

It was them. They were here. There was no question about that. The wolf wagon was unique and unmistakable. If it was here in Winhaven, then my brothers were here as well.

The moment I spotted it, I'd turned to run. Instinct had taken over and I'd entirely forgotten that I was on my way to the palace as an invited guest of the Duke and Duchess of Winberg. My only thought had been to flee, so I'd turned to do just that, only to have Hatcher's arms catch me. I clung to him, my face burrowed into his shoulder both for comfort and to hide my face. My quick breaths echoed in my ears as I willed my heart to calm. I must keep my wits about me if I were to avoid Daggon and Morley.

A moment ago, I'd been nervous but euphoric at the idea of going to the palace. Recognition from the sovereign rulers of our land would surely improve my ability to earn my living. Not only that, but I had Hatcher at my side. With his hand in mine and his comforting presence at my side, I'd almost been ready to tell him what I'd realized, to ask him if he could ever love me as more than a friend.

"Elise," Hatcher whispered in my ear. "Elise, tell me what's wrong. What did you see?"

I pressed my face into his shoulder even more and held my breath. I didn't want to say it. Saying it made it more real.

"Please tell me." The worry in his voice tugged on my heart.

"My brothers," I whispered so low that I wondered if he would hear. "My brothers are here."

He tensed and his arms convulsed around me. "Where?"

I lifted my head, just enough that I could look up at him. "Do you see the huge wagon? The one that looks like a great animal?"

"Yes."

"That's the wolf. That was my home, my stage, my livelihood. If it is here, so are my brothers."

"Let's go then," he said immediately. "Let's leave right now. We can't let them find you."

I nodded, grateful for his decisive attitude.

He turned us so that we had our backs to the wagon and kept one arm around me as we walked.

As we neared the back of the crowd, we were halted by the same servant who had encouraged me to gather my things and follow the entourage in the first place. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," Hatcher answered.

"Well then, come, come," he said, gesturing toward the crowd that was gathering around my brothers' act. "We must stay with Their Graces. They would be most disappointed if those they deigned to invite were to get lost in the crowd and not show up." He said it kindly, but there was a clear message behind his words. A message that said my attendance was not optional. The duchess had chosen me, and as such, I would be performing for her tonight—by force if necessary. He gave us another smile, gesturing behind us.

I pulled out my cloak and put it on over my costume as we reluctantly turned around and joined the crowd that stood waiting to watch my brothers perform.

"If the duke and duchess are choosing the most impressive entertainers, they will choose my brothers," I said with certainty, pulling my hood up to cover my hair.

"Where is your hat? The one with the veil?" he asked.

"We are in Winhaven!" I said, sounding hysterical. "We are at the northern tip of Winberg. My brothers always stayed south. We never came here, not in all the years I was growing up. There was not supposed to be a reason to veil my face here or in Stormbrook or Lorta."

"Right" was all he said before looking over his clothing, examining the material, then looking over at me. He ran his hands over my cloak, then lifted it to look at the Starling cape that was underneath. Then he crouched to look over the hem of my skirt before straightening and with only a slightly abashed expression said, "I can make something to cover your face, but I'll need some of your petticoat."

"Take whatever you need."

He gave a solid nod, then pulled a knife from his belt and started ripping out the dark brown lining of his vest before kneeling down and cutting a wide strip from the bottom of my cream petticoat. A few people in the crowd around us gave us odd looks, but most were clamoring to get closer to the wolf wagon, exclaiming over its size and design.

"Put your hands out," Hatcher said, standing directly in front of me.

I did as he asked, essentially becoming his work table as he set the pieces of fabric on my hands, then pulled a needle from the shoulder of his vest and thread from a pouch at his waist. He started ripping, folding, and stitching while I looked on in amazement. He pulled feathers from my costume, adding them to the patchwork he was creating.

"Your Graces!" the voice of Daggon called out. My head shot up to stare at him and my stomach tied into a knot. "We are most honored that you would condescend to watch our little performance!"

The cadence of my brother's voice, the volume and tone were all so familiar and made my stomach turn. The memories crashed over me. Daggon had always been the one to announce while I'd stayed out of sight, the bangles and chains that had adorned my costume meant to represent my enslavement to the beast. Daggon had always claimed that in order to free me, the greed of the beast must be fed by contributions from the audience. Of course it wasn't actually the beast-like wagon that was greedy. It was him and Morley. Morley who had sat inside much of the time. He was the one who made the wagon roar and move, bringing it to life.

"My friends!" Daggon called out again. "Will you help me? Will you listen to the sad tale of how my wife was enslaved to this beast?"

The crowd cheered, but all I could think was, His wife?

I turned my face to the spectacle, just enough that I was able to see when a beautiful woman with black hair stood on top of the wagon, her face streaked in soot, her costume comprised of ripped strips of fabric knotted around her. Her dramatically distressed costume was coupled with a look of

defiance, whereas when I had played the role, I'd relied on my youth and innocence to elicit sympathy.

The woman appeared to be several years older than I—closer to my brother's age than mine, which was some relief. Were they truly married, or was that just part of the act? Either way, I hoped she knew what she was getting into when she joined them.

I watched the spectacle, my hood pulled far forward to keep my face in shadow while Hatcher worked frantically alongside me.

"Help us, friends!" Daggon called out with dramatic fright. "My wife is trapped in the belly of the beast!"

Those words made my hands start to shake. I remembered all too well what it was like to truly be trapped in the belly of the beast, forced into the dark confines of the hidden compartment on the underside of the wagon. Cold, alone, and crying.

Hatcher put a hand to the side of my face and turned it to face him. "They can't hurt you. You have me now. Do you hear me?"

It took me a moment, but I nodded, trying to believe.

"You're safe." He pressed a kiss to my forehead and went back to work.

The display my brothers put on was very similar to the one I'd performed with them hundreds of times. Whenever Morley manipulated the wagon from inside to make it move or roar, the audience would gasp in surprise and delight. Aside from myself, there were probably only a few people here who had seen the wolf wagon in all its glory. This audience was fresh and more than happy to part with their coins when my brother's dark-haired wife came around, begging for coins to buy her freedom from the beast with her sultry eyes and slinky walk.

When the performance ended, the cheering was loud. Too loud. Or maybe I just felt that way because everything felt like too much to me. The noise, the crowd, the sound of my brothers' voices, the clank and creak of the wagon.

"It's ingenious," the duke declared as the applause died down. "What say you, my dear? Shall we invite them to the banquet?"

"I'd like to say yes, but I do not believe their clever contraption would fit into the grand hall," she announced with a tinkling laugh.

The crowd chuckled along with the duke.

"A point well taken, so perhaps they might perform in the courtyard when it is their turn to entertain. I hate to leave such talent out just because their act is larger than life."

I couldn't tell if the duke was playing the role of the magnanimous ruler or if that was truly his demeanor.

Of course, my brothers greedily accepted the invitation and set to work preparing the wolf wagon to be moved, which would be quite a feat. A guard was left behind to assist them, and the rest of us were directed to the path leading to the palace walls.

As Hatcher and I followed at the back of the crowd, my heart filled with trepidation. I might stay out of sight in this crowd. I might even be able to keep my head down at the banquet and avoid being seen by my brothers. But what of my performance? There seemed to be ten or twelve performers or groups that had been selected, and I had no doubt that every one of us would be required to entertain. Without something to hide my face, how could I possibly hope to avoid being recognized?

Elise

The closer we came to the palace, the more out of place I felt. The outer wall was high and imposing, guards visible at regular intervals. The great door in the wall was arched, a deep red color criss-crossed with iron bands in diamond shapes. Since my hooded cloak hid me better from behind, we had moved to the front of the group, so as we approached, I noticed a smaller door set into the great door. The smaller door was the height of a man and opened as we approached, allowing me a glimpse of the palace grounds.

They were beautiful. I'd expected a rather harsh, stone-laid courtyard, but what I saw through that smaller door looked very much like a garden. The sight reminded me of the red roses that the servants had been decorating with. The door closed after a guard had come through it, and our group halted when the duke turned to address us.

"Travelers!" he called out, his hands held high. "Allow us to welcome you to Winhaven Palace. Our feast will begin in one hour. Until then, we encourage you to enjoy the grounds and participate in some lawn games. Please," he said, sweeping his arm toward the great door, which began to slowly open. "Follow me."

I'd been half right. The path we walked was indeed paved in stone, but it was just a narrow drive leading from the gate and up toward the palace. Stretching out and around the palace on both sides were magnificent gardens like I'd never seen before or even imagined.

I'd heard tell of the great gardens of the Kingdom of Dalthia. They were well known and renowned for their expansive beauty, but I had a difficult time imagining anything better than this. There were bushes shaped like

animals. There were swaths of brightly colored roses, and wisteria falling from archways. So many flowers grew that I could not name.

As the group dispersed to explore the grounds, I felt Hatcher tug on my hand. "Come," he said.

I followed him off the stone path and between two tall hedges that had been sculpted into the shapes of a turtle and a griffon. Beyond that, we found a pathway also lined in hedges. "Is this a maze?"

"It looks like it." He turned to check over his shoulder. "It also looks like a good spot to stay out of sight while I finish this headpiece."

We ran together through the maze, taking several random turns, trying to get lost. We eventually ran into a lovely dead end with a bench sitting between two well-kept rose bushes. "Here, sit," he said, pulling me down to sit on the bench as he crouched in front of me. His eyes darted to me, then down to the fabric and needle in his hands and then back to me. "How are you?" he asked, his concern pulsing off of him.

I blew out a breath. "I've been trying to let the scenery distract me. I just can't believe they're here. I can't—" Then I shook my head, hating how fear of my own brothers ate at my heart. I chewed on my thumb as I stared at the deep-green hedges around us. "Tell me something else. I don't want to talk about them."

I felt something on my other hand and looked down to where it rested on my knee. Hatcher had wrapped his pinkie around mine. I looked up at him. He studied my face, and after a moment, he set the fabric on the ground beside him and moved closer, taking my hand fully in his as he knelt in front of me. "Before...all of this," he said, glancing around with a sardonic grin, "you said you wanted to talk."

The way he gripped my hand and leaned closer stole my breath. Had he always looked at me this way? Had he always leaned in? "Yes," I said, remembering just how much I had to say.

His look turned a bit desperate. "Are you going to tell me what you wanted to say, or am I expected to wonder forever?"

I stared into his eyes and reached a tentative hand to his cheek.

His lips parted and he let out a puff of breath, but the rest of him was frozen, like he was afraid to scare me away, like he *wanted*. Then his throat convulsed on a swallow. "Elise," he said in a broken whisper. "Please say it."

"Say what?" I asked as I tried to gather my nerve.

He reached up and put his hand over mine, holding it in place on his cheek. "Whatever it is you wanted to say."

I wanted to believe that the pinched emotion I saw in his eyes and the way he clung to my hand meant that he yearned for me in the same way I yearned for him, and that it wasn't just protectiveness or friendly concern. I thought I could feel his want for me, but saying the words was too frightening, too clear and final, especially when the knowledge of how I felt was so new to me.

As his eyes caressed my face, his other hand settled against my waist and he moved a little closer. The warmth of his hand on my hip gave me courage, so I leaned in, just a little at a time, waiting to see if he would pull away or turn aside. Instead, he closed his eyes and waited, so I leaned in a little more. My body was quivering with nerves by the time my lips reached his, settling against their softness.

He sighed, and just as he started to push forward, pressing his lips more firmly against mine, a rustling of leaves and a burst of giggles made me pull back and look around in panic. Another couple had found our little hideaway, and after noticing us, they were quickly trying to retreat. The man pulled the grinning woman away by the waist, muttering about finding their own corner.

My heart pounded from being startled, but even more from the interrupted moment. My gaze darted back to Hatcher, and I saw the same frantic energy humming through him that I felt. I hated that our first moment of what could have been...something had been so thoroughly ruined, but reclaiming it was impossible. We were not alone here and we needed to stay on our guard.

Hatcher's hand tensed on my hip before letting go. He cleared his throat and picked up the dark fabric from the ground, then moved to sit on the bench beside me. "This won't be as pretty as the rest of your costume, but hopefully it will hide your face enough." His voice was husky.

I nodded, my fingers toying with the brooch that held my cape in place. I sat there, my mind running with worries about my brothers, and worries about Hatcher and how he felt about me, because clearly he felt something.

"Here," he said a few minutes later. "Let's try this." He reached up and wrapped the dark fabric around my head in the same way that the fortune tellers did. It banded low on my forehead, and he'd attached some of the green feathers along the edge to hang down over my eyes.

"I'm sorry if it tickles," he said.

"It does, but it will be worth it."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't think of a better way to do this. If I had—" I put a hand on his knee, stopping his rant. "Don't apologize. It's wonderful."

He looked down at me as he gently gathered my hair together, sending shivers across my neck as he wound it in a knot. His gaze shifted from my hair to my eyes, and I wanted so badly to be able to talk about everything I saw there, but I couldn't. If I hoped to survive the evening without invoking my brothers' retribution, I had to focus on the tasks at hand. I pulled my gaze away as he carefully tied the long ends of the fabric around my hair, concealing it completely. When I looked up again, even through the feathers, I could see the way his eyes skimmed over my face. Was there love there? I so wanted there to be love there.

His fingers caressed the side of my neck as he pulled away, and I had to break eye contact again. Survival first. Then confessions of love. That was the proper order.

"I think it's best if we put your cloak away. If you're in your costume, with your face obscured, you'll be more likely to appear as the Starling. And since your brothers have never known you as the Starling, they won't connect her with their sister."

I nodded, knowing I would need to stay in my persona all evening. I would need to walk and talk and sit like the Starling, not like Elise. I swallowed. "I wish we could just hide away here," I whispered.

"So do I..." He didn't move to go anywhere, and I had the feeling that if I chose to stay, he would stay right there with me.

But that wasn't an option. The rulers of our nation had asked me to perform for them. It had to be done.

Maddox

She took several methodic breaths, drawing in her courage. If she wanted to stay, I wouldn't push her to do otherwise. In fact, it took great restraint not to draw her to me in an attempt to reclaim that interrupted moment. She'd kissed me, and I was still trying to believe it was real. It had lasted for only the most fleeting moment before the other couple had destroyed it, but it had been there. Her lips, which had felt very much like silk, had been

on mine, ready and willing to be kissed. Oh, how I wanted to kiss her now, but with how much worry was heaped upon her, I could not bring myself to be selfish about it. Even though the madness which had been slowly consuming me for three years looked like it might come to an end. She might turn my world right side up again if she would just tell me how she felt. If she would only let me know that that kiss had been more than just an experiment, more than just a whim. If she would just *say it*.

Elise rubbed her hands against the black wool of her starling skirt and then stood. "We should go," she declared.

I managed to suppress the groan of frustration that rose to my throat. She was right. We had to deal with the situation up at the palace first.

"If I'm going to have to sit in the same room with them and eat and perform—" Her voice broke and my heart squeezed in sympathy. She blew out a breath. "I need practice first. I need to go be the Starling around the other performers before we go inside."

"Good idea." And it was. Her idea made sense and it was certainly for the best. So despite my desire to run my hands over her shoulder blades and down her back, despite the way my mouth watered at the thought of finally, truly being able to kiss my Elise, I shoved all of that down and just gave her a hug, trying to lend her my strength.

She hugged me in return, and when she pulled back, her "Thank you" was effusive and heartfelt. Then she took my hand and we left our solitary corner of the maze.

After a few turns, Elise's shoulders started to relax. "How long do you suppose it will take us to find our way out?" she asked, her mouth almost pulling up in a smile.

I shrugged, grateful to see her worry eased, if only temporarily. "I suppose it depends on how big it is."

Two fire dancers ran by us, too preoccupied to answer when I called out, "Do you know the way out?"

After two more turns, we saw someone step out into the path before us, looking one way, then pulling out a pocket watch before turning our direction.

"Robert," Elise said in surprise.

I resisted the urge to curse. The last thing we wanted or needed right now was *Robert*.

He looked a bit startled and then grinned and sauntered our way. "It's White, remember," he said, tapping the side of his nose. "Must keep the persona, after all." He pulled a deck of cards from his pocket, fanned them out, turned them this way and that and then returned them to his pocket.

"Yes, of course," Elise said, sounding distracted. "I'm surprised you're here already."

"When I heard you'd gone, I thought, why not come as well? Good thing I did." He straightened his vest in a preening gesture. "You could have told me the duke likes to pick favorites."

"Um..." was all Elise said, clearly not following the conversation.

White frowned. "Is everything well?" he asked with a pointed look at our joined hands.

Elise's hand twitched in mine, and for one awful moment, I thought that she was going to drop my hand, embarrassed to be caught by White. Instead, she just gripped my hand all the more firmly and my chest expanded with pride. "We're fine," she said.

"Well," White went on as he pulled his infernal pocket watch out again. "Best find your way out. We don't want to be late for the grand feast." He tucked it away. "Congratulations on being selected by the duchess."

"And you," Elise said politely. "Do you know the way out?" He threw a thumb over his shoulder. "That way, I believe."

"Thank you," Elise said and immediately walked in that direction. "Best of luck tonight."

"We'll both be marvelous, I'm certain." He waved a gloved hand and was soon out of sight.

I looked down at Elise as we walked the path at a more sedate pace than before. Finally I could keep my mouth shut no longer. "I know he's your friend, but I can't seem to like that man."

She gave me a sad smile. "I'm not certain what to think of him either." Her face pulled down in a frown.

"Does he know how wary you are of your brothers?" I asked, remembering all too well the way he had defended their actions when I'd brought up their ill treatment of Elise.

"Yes." She sounded tired.

"And he probably saw them here," I said, trying to prompt her into saying what I did not want to say. "They are hard to miss, and the duke himself pointed them out."

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"Yes."
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"And yet..."

She sighed. "He showed no concern for me."

I let out my own sigh, glad that she recognized it. I would not have relished the idea of pointing it out myself. "I'm sorry, Elise." I lifted her hand and kissed the back of it, gratified when she looked up at me with light in her eyes and a soft smile on her lips.

She looked forward and gave a little shrug. "He is not what I thought he was. Oh, look!" She pointed. "That looks like the way out." She hurried her stride, and we both stepped out of the maze and onto a large swath of grass where a troupe of acrobats and jugglers were doing tricks and playing games.

One of the young acrobats—clearly a child of acrobatic parents who no doubt had been born and bred for the stunts—ran up to us after we'd been watching for a few minutes. "Will you play with us?" she invited, her belled anklet tinkling as she walked.

Elise laughed lightly. "I don't think we know the game."

"Sure you do," she said. "It's croquet."

We both looked at each other and then back at the troupe. "Is it?" I asked.

The girl nodded. "Watch me. I'm one of the crooked sticks." She ran off to join four acrobats who were stacked in pairs. Each of the women who stood on the men's shoulders reached down and took one of the girl's hands. In unison, the pairs moved forward, swinging the girl back and then forward until her feet hit against the backside of a young boy, who then rolled into a ball. The boy continued doing forward rolls until he tucked himself beneath the back of a tall man who was in a backbend, acting as one of the wickets. Once the young boy was through, he stood up, and the jugglers (who were standing on the sidelines looking very serious) clapped in exaggerated politeness, exclaiming to one another about what a fine shot it was.

I chuckled at the act. It was precisely what this troupe was best known for. They imitated the habits of high society but made them ridiculous and funny.

"Your turn," the girl said, waving us forward.

Elise looked up at me, her brow lifting as if asking if I'd like to participate in this charade or not.

If it was a distraction Elise wanted, this certainly qualified.

"Very well," I proclaimed, then swept Elise's legs out from under her and cradled her in my arms. "She shall be my crooked stick. Where is the ball?"

I was gratified to hear Elise chuckling as I ran up to the little boy who had done forward rolls and swung her feet until they tapped his backside. I could have put her down, especially when the troupe declared us the winners, but I was more than happy to keep her tucked in my arms where I could ensure her safety.

A horn sounded, and when a servant called for us to gather, I was forced to set Elise back on her feet as we all made our way to the front steps of the palace. Elise's hand started to shake in mine, so I leaned down and whispered, "Time to be the Starling."

She took a careful breath through her nose and nodded. She released my hand and lifted her chin before stepping boldly, almost regally, onto the steps. I stayed a step behind her, recognizing that she needed to appear confident and independent as we entered the palace.

Elise

The nobility sat at tables around the exterior of the room, while the performers sat on cushions in front of low tables. The duke and duchess sat at the high table, facing all of us in their elaborate high-backed chairs. Between the performers and the high table was a large empty space where I had to assume we would be performing.

I watched the high table, nervous about eating my own meal before the duke and duchess had started theirs. Though plenty of people were putting food into their mouths, unconcerned, I still watched, curious if royals ate in some sort of fancy way. A servant set a bowl in front of them, which they used to dip their hands before drying them on towels offered to them by other servants. Then they leaned back and allowed two more servants to drape napkins across their laps. Only then did they pick up their food and start to eat.

My eyes darted about the room, making sure that my brothers still sat on the other side of the great hall, Daggon's wife looking more shocked and out of place than they did. I had to continually remind myself to keep my Starling bearing in place. If I were to slouch and hide the way I wanted to, it would be all the more suspicious. The Starling did not cower. I started searching all the faces, wondering if anyone in the room besides Hatcher and Robert knew who I was and my connection to the Wolfe brothers. If so, would they say something? Could I really keep my identity a secret, especially when I would be asked to perform at some point? I raised my hand to touch the headpiece, with its feathers falling in my eyes and the fabric covering my hair, hoping it was enough.

Hatcher placed his hand over mine, and when I looked at him, he mouthed the word "Breathe." As I slowly filled my lungs with air and then

let it out, I saw Robert working his way through the room, doing card tricks and sleight of hand. Hatcher followed my gaze and then rolled his eyes. "He's an invited guest of the duke and duchess, and yet he can't stop pulling attention to himself."

I shrugged. "He's a born performer." That wasn't what bothered me, though. What bothered me was that he'd made me believe he was my friend, and yet when I looked back on our interactions, his concern had always been for *his* wants, *his* entertainment and notoriety. Never mine.

We returned to our meal, and I did my best to enjoy it while keeping my brothers in sight. They moved about the room as well, though Daggon's wife seemed content to stay seated.

"What are your brothers' names?" Hatcher asked as we watched them approach the high table, offering something to the duchess.

"Daggon is the one handing something to Her Grace. He's more hottempered, while Morley tends to be more thoughtful."

"So Morley wasn't as mean?"

I grimaced and shook my head, watching as Daggon left the high table and Morley stayed behind, no doubt to flatter the duchess. "He was just a different kind of mean. Less volatile, more calculated."

Hatcher's fist clenched where it sat on the table and his nostrils flared. It was my turn to cover his hand with mine. "It's all right."

"Nothing they did was all right."

"No, but I'm all right now."

He blew out a breath, then turned to me. "Yes, you are."

Robert chose that moment to lean in between us, one arm outstretched to present the spray of cards in his hand. "Pick a card, friends. Maybe it will be the lucky one."

I froze for only a second before quickly selecting one, hopeful that he'd move on and not draw any further attention to us.

"Not lucky, I'm afraid," Robert said, then held his other hand in front of my face, a small flower pinched between his fingers. "A consolation prize."

"Thank you." I took the flower, grateful when he immediately moved on.

A few minutes later, the herald stood. My heart jumped into my throat as he announced the first act, which thankfully was not me. I realized I needed to decide on a song and rehearse in my head. The song about the dragon was my most engaging, so that one made the most sense.

The acrobats were called up and I did my best to enjoy their performance, but when I sensed it coming to an end, my back tensed and my knee bounced up and down.

Hatcher wordlessly put a hand on my knee, calming the erratic movement. I was grateful we were seated on the cushions. It made it easy for me to lean into him, using his warmth to calm me.

We clapped when the acrobats ended their performance. The herald stood and called out, "White, the jester magician, will now take the stage."

Hatcher leaned in to whisper in my ear. "Do you suppose he knows how ridiculous he looks with that watch?"

I smiled and huffed a laugh as Hatcher kept up a running monologue, whispered in my ear during the entirety of Robert's act. I was so amused that I didn't have time to tense up before the next act was called.

His efforts to distract me were valiant, but as more acts were called, the odds of my name being next increased and it became more difficult to relax at all.

"My distractions don't seem to be working anymore," Hatcher commented.

I felt bad that he was trying so hard to put me at ease. "I just want this night to be over. Every time they stand to introduce a new act, I want to throw up. And each time he doesn't call my name, it's a relief, but it also just prolongs the torture."

I vaguely registered that he was moving closer, but it wasn't until his lips pressed lightly to the side of my neck that he gained my full attention. The warm sensation of that kiss and the tickle of his breath brushing against my skin made me melt.

He rested his chin on my shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "I probably shouldn't tease you like that. But I'm running out of ideas for how to ease your worry."

He may have been running out of ideas, but even after he sat back in his chair, I suddenly had plenty. Finding some time by ourselves when we could actually have a full conversation could not happen quickly enough. Was he kissing me solely as a distraction or was it more? I suspected it was more, and I wanted it to be more, especially with the way my body hummed from just the memory of that light kiss to my neck, but the seeds of doubt and uncertainty refused to be ignored—especially after Robert. I had thought I knew how Robert felt. I'd thought he and I were rekindling a

childhood infatuation. What better foundation to build on than friendship and second chances? But everything with Robert had existed only on the surface. It was only looking back that I had realized that Robert had never gone deep. Garnet had allowed me to see that. She had spoken about digging down to find myself, and the more I thought on that, the more I realized how important it was in a relationship to dig deep to discover each other. And Robert...had never dug deep for anything. He'd never cared enough to ask me my deeper feelings, or to share his.

I looked over at Hatcher. Hatcher cared. Not just enough to ask, but to keep asking, and to do something about it.

He smiled and bumped my shoulder. "Come, Starling. Act like a fancy lady." He picked up his goblet and took a slurping sip. "So refreshing," he intoned in a lower voice than was natural.

I laughed a little, and the words "Oh, I love you," slipped past my lips before I realized I was saying them.

He turned to me, looking stunned and confused. "What did you say?"

I dropped my eyes to my plate. Curse me and my foolish, loose tongue. "Nothing." I took a sip from my goblet to calm my embarrassment and slow my racing heart. "This meal is certainly better than any I've ever tasted. Are you enjoying it?" I babbled.

"No." He shook his head and moved closer, his eyes intent. "Just repeat what you said. It was too loud to hear clearly, and—"

A horn sounded and we turned to watch the herald announce, "And for our next bit of entertainment, we would like to invite the Starling to our stage."

My heart continued to pound, but this time for different reasons. I didn't notice how fiercely I was gripping Hatcher's hand until he squeezed in return. When I looked into his eyes, they were filled with confidence and reassurance. "You are not Elise Wolfe right now. You are the Starling. And that's all anyone need see."

I gave one firm nod and stood, sweeping gracefully to the middle of the floor, surrounded by the duke and duchess, the nobility, and the other festival acts, including my own brothers.

I took careful and deliberate breaths, rousing my courage for this moment. Then I sang the song of the Starling and the dragon that almost swallowed her whole.

When I reached the climactic moment, I reached two fingers into my pocket, taking hold of the end of a red and orange scarf. My voice rang out with the final note and then I cut it off abruptly, pulling my hand out and tossing the vibrant, fire-colored scarf into the air above me.

The moment should have been beautiful, dramatic and silent. Instead, something metallic clattered to the ground at my feet, breaking the spell and causing not gasps of awed delight but murmurs of suspicion and curiosity.

I winced. My performance had been going so well. Despite my nerves and the fear that my brothers were more than likely going to recognize me regardless of Hatcher's clever disguise, I had done well. The audience had been captivated. Having it ruined at the last moment was heartbreaking and infuriating.

I slowly lowered my arms, doing my best to maintain my poise and hopefully salvage the performance. But as I sank into a curtsey, the duchess's shrill voice rang out.

"That's my ring!" she cried out, rising to her feet, the bright red of her dress flowing from her shoulders like liquid fire.

I looked down. There was indeed a ring sitting on the floor at my feet. It was huge. A thick gold band with a large red stone in the middle. It could have belonged to no one else but the duchess.

"You ungrateful thief! I'll have your head for this!" she screeched.

I looked up at her words, horrified to see her staring straight at *me*. She thought *I'd* stolen it. I shrank, wanting nothing but to disappear and be somewhere else. This could not be happening. Contending with my brothers was one thing, but being branded a thief by the Sovereign Duke and Duchess of Winberg?

"Guards! Remove this girl from my sight!"

The guards rushed to obey.

"No!" Hatcher jumped up in my defense. "It couldn't have been her!" he shouted as the guards moved to block his path. "She was nowhere near the duchess!" he pointed out.

"Halt," the duke said calmly, and the guards stopped, though their hold on Hatcher was firm. He fixed his icy gaze on Hatcher. "Speak," he ordered.

"Your Grace," he said, swallowing with difficulty as he directed his question to the duchess. "I beg you, think back. Was this girl ever close enough to you that she could have taken something off your person?"

"I cannot remember everyone I came into contact with," the duchess declared, her eyes cold.

"But she has been occupying that seat the entirety of the evening until she was called upon to perform. Can any who sat close to her say differently?" he asked, looking to the people who had sat on either side of us.

The duke directed his attention to those who had sat around me. None spoke up. He rubbed his fingers along his chin as he considered what Hatcher was saying. Then he said, "Go on."

Hope blazed in my chest. The duke was hearing him out.

Hatcher went a little pale but stood his ground. "And what of these men?" he said, gesturing toward my brothers. "Were they always in their seats?"

There were murmurs and several people shook their heads.

"No," the duke said. "They moved freely about the room. They even came over to give us a favor during the meal." His shrewd gaze fell upon my brothers, anger and suspicion in his eyes as he looked them over. "It was a clever distraction, to be sure, but the young man is right. The girl never came close enough, but these men did. Bring them here."

The guards surrounding Hatcher moved to seize my brothers and forced them to kneel before the duke.

The room was buzzing with murmurs and whispers, but everyone was silenced when the duke looked shrewdly down at my brothers and said simply, "Explain yourself."

Morley's face was a picture of befuddled innocence. "We have done nothing, Your Grace," he said, his eyes beseeching. "Truly, we do not know why this man insists on our guilt. We may have approached you, but if it were us, how did the trinket end up with the girl? We never came near her."

I knew in an instant he was speaking the truth.

The duke turned to me. "Young lady, did these men get close to you?" he asked.

"No," I said, though part of me wished to lie, just to ensure their punishment.

"Not that you noticed, at least?" he prompted.

I shook my head, my mind running like a swift river as I thought through how that ring could have ended up in my pocket if my brothers had stolen it but hadn't come near me. "Believe me, Your Grace, if they had done it, I would have known. I've been watching them all evening, keeping track of where they were so that I could avoid them."

His head tilted to the side, clearly curious. "And why is that?"

I swallowed hard, making the decision to lean into what I knew. "Because I didn't want them near me. I didn't want them to get close enough to recognize me."

The duke looked baffled. "Recognize you?"

I breathed deep and then took the headpiece off. "I am their sister."

"Elise!" Morley hissed in shock.

I spared him a look, noting the disgust and surprise on his face, before turning back to the duke, my head held high.

The duke's brow lifted. "Are you saying they are innocent?"

"No, sir," I said as memories of picking pockets and handing coins off to my brothers ran through my head. "But they must have had an accomplice." "Explain."

Explain. Just explain, Elise, I prompted myself as my entire body shook with fear and nerves. Yes, your freedom and your very life are at stake, but the duke is asking you to explain, so speak! "I would guess that they removed the trinket from Her Grace, handed it off to someone else, and then that person put it in my pocket."

"Well," the duchess said, looking down her lofty nose at me. "Since you seem to be all-knowing, why not tell us who this accomplice is?"

I didn't know. The *who* eluded me. I only knew that I'd seen them do it before; I'd even *helped* them do it before. Yet, who had gotten close to me this evening? Daggon's wife had remained in her seat. A few jugglers had stood to do tricks here and there, but none had come close enough to me. Aside from Hatcher and Robert, I had interacted with few other people. Hatcher would never do such a thing, and Robert...

Robert.

A feeling of dread settled in my stomach.

I looked around, trying to find his face among the sea of people surrounding me. We were friends, weren't we? Yes, I could see now that he was self-absorbed, but he would never do something to deliberately hurt me—would he?

"Robert?" I called, hoping he'd step out from behind someone else, his face a mask of innocence and curiosity, hoping he would prove these awful suspicions wrong. But he didn't respond.

"Who is Robert?" the duke asked.

"White," I answered, looking around frantically. "The jester magician. Robert!" I called out, more loudly, still clinging to the hope that he might step forward. People in the crowd turned to one another, looking about, murmuring their questions or opinions. But Robert didn't materialize. "He fled," I whispered to myself, then looked up at the duke again. "He was the accomplice," I said quietly as the realization came. Then I turned to my brothers. "Wasn't he?"

"Accomplice to what?" Morley asked. "This is all just stories and wild accusations."

I studied Morley's face, looking for deception, but he had seemed genuinely surprised when I'd taken my headpiece off. And if he didn't know who I was, then why would he target me? Why ask White to plant the stolen item on me? I looked to Daggon, hoping for answers.

And I found them.

Daggon wasn't blustering or confused. He didn't look at me as though seeing a ghost the way that Morley did. His face was set like iron and just as cold. He had already known who I was, and he'd attempted to hurt me because of it.

It shouldn't have hurt. The realization that my brother wanted to continue hurting me shouldn't have been surprising or painful. It was just the way things were. But my heart didn't seem to know that. My heart wanted my brothers to feel some sort of remorse or guilt over the way they'd treated me. My heart wanted something better.

My heart wanted something it was never going to get.

Maddox

I saw the pain and betrayal marring Elise's face and wanted nothing more than to go to her. If only to keep her safe, or at least give her comfort. But this was not the time for rash displays of affection. I could see the duke and duchess changing their minds, and I truly believed we had almost convinced them of Elise's innocence.

"Wait," the duchess called out. "My bracelet is gone." She was feeling both her wrists, then her hands went to her ears, touching her earrings, then the delicate circlet on her head, before moving to her throat. "And my necklace," she shrieked, then turned her blazing eyes on Elise and her

brothers in turn. "Search her!" she demanded, pointing at Elise. "And them, and him!" she ordered as she gestured to the Wolfe brothers and then at myself.

"And someone find that magician!" the duke called out, his voice sounding truly fierce for the first time. He'd kept his temper in check when dealing with a single ring, but having the duchess stripped of multiple priceless items had pushed our sovereign ruler over the edge.

As the guards swarmed me, all I could hope was that Robert had not planted more of the stolen items on either Elise or me.

As I watched the guards searching her, touching her, it was all I could do to stay still and silent. I reminded myself that the guards were just doing their jobs, and just because seeing anyone else touching her made me want to roar like a great bear didn't mean I should.

She'd said she loved me. At least, I'd thought those were the words. They'd been quiet and said on a sigh and I could not be positive that they'd been real. I'd imagined her saying it so many times—daydreamed about it so often that perhaps my imaginings were muddling reality. *That* truly would be madness.

The guards were quickly finished with me, finding nothing hidden on my person.

Elise was not so lucky.

"What's this?" a guard said, holding up a delicate bracelet. "Is this the one, Your Grace?" he asked, turning to the duchess.

Elise opened her mouth in horror.

"No," the duchess said, surprising us all. "That isn't mine."

"It's mine!" a shout came from my left. A noblewoman stood, clutching her wrist.

"See," someone shouted.

I whipped my head around to see that it was Daggon speaking.

"She's the thief! She's—"

"And so are you," said the guard who'd been searching him as he pulled a jeweled dagger from Daggon's boot. "Looks a bit too fancy for a peddler. Does this belong to anyone?" the guard asked, holding it up in the air.

A large man heaved himself to his feet. "That's mine," he blustered, redfaced. "It even has my family crest on it."

The guard looked more closely at the dagger. "So it does." He gave Daggon a haughty glare.

With each word, the duchess's fury burned hotter and the duke became dangerously silent.

"Daggon," Morley said in a voice that indicated both confusion and censure.

"Shut it, Morley," Daggon spat at him. They each glared at the other as the great hall filled with murmurs of indignation and shouts for retribution.

"I've seen enough," the duke said when the guards had finished their search.

All fell silent.

His voice wasn't booming. It was a perfectly normal volume, but the weight it carried smothered all movement and conversation, and we each held our breath to hear his next words.

"Guards, take the Wolfe brothers and the Starling to the dungeon. It seems they all have plenty to answer for."

My heart fell to my feet as fear blanketed Elise's face. No. Not Elise. Not trapped in a dungeon for something she did not do. No.

My feet moved toward her, but a guard put a hand to my chest with a warning look. How could they believe her guilty? How could her brothers betray her so thoroughly?

All I could do was stare after her as she looked at me with terror, her eyes begging for help that I could not give. My own ineptitude slammed into me, making my fists clench and my whole body shake.

Just before she was pulled out of sight, the hope died in her eyes and she looked away from me. She knew as well as I did that my hands were tied.

Once Elise and her brothers were out of the dining hall, it erupted in exclamations and hushed conversations. The nobles looked affronted, while the performers looked defensive and uncomfortable. The woman who had been with the Wolfe brothers sat silent and small on her cushion, likely hoping everyone would forget about her.

"It seems I misjudged my guests," the duke said, and once again the room fell silent. "After this unfortunate incident, I have lost my appetite for amusements."

"Get out, all of you!" the duchess yelled, her ire unchecked.

But the duke held up a calming hand and she quieted, turning away in fury. "Please," he said, gesturing toward the group in a gracious way, though he too seemed to be having trouble controlling his anger. "Finish your meal, and then you will be asked to depart, and every entertainer will

need to be searched on the way out." There arose protests, but he held up his hand again. "I know it is not fair that all should suffer for the crimes of a few. But that is the lot we've been dealt this evening. So please, *sit*." The word sit was not an invitation; it was a command. So although most of the festival rats in the room were more than ready to scurry out of the palace and return to where they were comfortable, each of us retook our seats and nervously resumed our meals.

The duke watched until everyone had taken a seat. Only then did he take his eyes from the group and turn to his guards. "And somebody, FIND THAT MAGICIAN!" he yelled.

The captain of the guard was quick to give direction and assignments as all the guests did their best to finish their meal.

But I couldn't stomach another bite, not when my mind was tortured with images of where Elise had been taken and the uncertainty of how long she would be there.

So I bided my time until a few guests started to leave. Then I stood and made my way out of the palace, submitting to yet another search before I was permitted to walk away.

Elise

I walked on shaking knees, the guard's rough hand holding tight to my arm and pulling me along through corridors and down some stairs. We reached a door more formidable than most. It wasn't difficult to guess where it would lead. My brothers' blustering protests died when that door swung open and the dank air rose up to engulf us. The guard pushed me ahead of him, and no matter how much I wished to be brave, my steps were tentative as I walked down the stone steps, the sound of my footfalls deadened by the moisture and the uneven stones of the wall. I stepped down the final stair with my heart in my throat, shaking so violently that I was almost numb. The corridor in front of me was barely lit. The ceiling was low, the walls close and shadowed. We passed two doors before the guard opened one of the cells. "In you go," he said.

I stepped barely inside and stopped, terrified to move farther into the darkness. He closed the door, the bars pushing against the back of my skirt. I stayed there, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness and listening to my brothers being escorted into their own cells. At least they were not being put in with me. It sounded like Daggon was being shoved into the cell right across from me. Morley was put in the cell to my right, though when I cut my eyes in that direction, I met only darkness. The doors were bars, but the walls were solid stone.

As the guards all retreated from the corridor and back up the stairs, my eyes adjusted enough to see that I was alone in the cell, which allowed me to breathe a little easier. A thick wooden bench sat along one wall, and I managed to walk over to it before collapsing onto it. I wrapped my arms around myself, rocking back and forth, trying to keep my wits about me. I hummed to keep myself from going crazy, adjusting the melody over and

over, filling my ears with the notes and my head with words to go along with it. I shut out the sound of my brothers arguing with one another and just hummed.

And hummed and hummed.

After some time, Daggon and Morley stopped arguing and I stopped rocking, my nerves and my wits returning. After sitting in the silence with my whirling thoughts for several minutes, I knew what I wanted.

Answers. I wanted answers, and my brothers could provide them. I breathed deeply for several minutes and then stood up and walked to the door of my cell. Daggon sat on the floor in the cell across from me, his face flickering in the weak torchlight, and I tried not to shrink as his eyes bore into mine.

I had to swallow twice, but then I managed to speak. "You recognized me," I said.

"Yes."

"What gave me away?"

His gaze dropped to my throat. "The brooch."

My hand went to the gold brooch I'd kept all these years. The money I'd stolen from them had long since been spent and replaced, but the brooch I had held on to. I was a little surprised the guards hadn't taken it from me.

His eyes returned to mine. "It was one of the most valuable pieces I ever took. And it disappeared the same night you did." His lip pulled up. "You stole it."

I tilted my chin up. "Yes, I did."

He bared his teeth for just a moment before he stuck his chin out and shrugged a shoulder—pretending not to care. "So when I saw your Starling character wearing it, it wasn't hard to figure out. You'd always loved singing, though I always found it annoying."

"Why are you here?" It was a struggle to keep my voice steady as the unfairness of their very presence tore at my insides.

"Because I was caught thieving," he said with biting sarcasm.

I pinched my lips together. "I mean in Winhaven. How did you get the wolf wagon through the mountains?" It should have been impossible—unthinkable.

He grinned with the kind of smugness I knew all too well. "We didn't go through the mountains."

I didn't bother asking him how that worked, knowing that his arrogance would force him to gloat about his brilliance.

"Winberg isn't the only place with festivals. Tride has villages with people just as rich and just as stupid as they are here. Plus, it's an easy journey from their northern villages into Winberg."

Was it? I didn't know much about the kingdom of Tride other than that it sat directly west of Winberg. "Then why come back? Why not stay and swindle the people of Tride?"

"And miss out on being selected as one of the duchess's favorite acts?"

I breathed carefully through my nose, trying to control the anger and frustration over the fact that they'd found a way to be here.

"So, why plant the duchess's ring on me?" I asked. It was the reason he'd been caught, after all. "Why steal it in the first place? If accolades were what you were after, why ruin it by stealing from the duchess? Do you hate me that much, Daggon?"

He sat forward suddenly, making me fall back a step. "Do you have any idea how hard it was for us to recover after you left? Not only did we have to rebuild the wagon after it was hacked to pieces, but we had to rebuild our entire show." His look of disdain was ugly and fierce. "No one wants to give money to grown men prancing about."

I straightened my spine just a little. "It's a shame you didn't think of that when I was around," I pointed out. "I would have stayed. I would have stayed forever if you had given me the slightest reason to believe you valued my presence. It wouldn't have taken much. Perhaps if you hadn't rewarded my performances with your fists, I would have stayed."

He stood and came at me, pounded his fists against the bars, making me jump back with my heart in my throat even though there were two sets of iron bars keeping us apart. "I used my fists to teach you your place," he spat. "We made you into something. We kept you safe all those years, and you paid us back by leaving us in a lurch and robbing us blind."

I let out a guffaw. "Robbed blind? If a couple fistfuls of coins and one brooch was all it took to make you destitute, then perhaps you aren't as good as you've always believed."

He pointed a sharp finger at me. "You are disloyal."

"And you're a manipulative barbarian!" I screamed. "A bully and a wretch. A man who would sell another human being and grin about the profit of it. Don't try to stand on some moral high ground about loyalty," I

sneered. "If loyalty meant anything to you, you would have gone looking for Mom when she disappeared instead of washing your hands of her."

"Gone looking for her?" He scoffed. "Why? She left us. She didn't want us, so why would I want her?"

"She did want us!" I argued, needing to believe it was true.

He raised his arms in a dramatic shrug. "She left on her own, and I couldn't keep taking care of her when she wouldn't pull her weight."

"She was our mother," I said, shocked by just how heartless he sounded.

"She was a drain on our resources."

I bit my tongue and took a deep breath. We would never agree on this. He would never give me answers about her. "Why plant the ring on me?" I asked again, needing to at least have that answered.

"The three of us were a team. We suffered together."

"You mean, you made me suffer," I corrected.

He ignored me and kept talking. "So when I saw you standing among the other acts, having earned the praise and notoriety we'd worked to achieve for years, I thought it was time that you had to work a little harder, suffer a little more. There are consequences to disloyalty."

So he really did hate me. I had to swallow down my anger and hurt several times before I could talk past it. "Well. Now you get to see me suffer. And you can suffer along with me." I turned away, running my hand over my face, unable to believe that this cell was now the reality of my life. Then I turned around. "And what about Robert White?" I asked. "I know he helped you. Are you really content to let him go free while you rot in here?" I looked around, noticing the cell that was beside Daggon's. A mound of dirty fabric, in the shape of a person, lay on the bench inside. A filthy foot stuck out from underneath. I sucked in an alarmed breath. Was that person dead? Was that to be my fate? Flies buzzed around the filthy lump, but there was no movement to swat it away. There was no movement at all. I swallowed hard and forced my eyes back to my brother. "We'll waste away together, I suppose—the three infamous Wolfe siblings—while White the magician goes free."

Daggon just stared at me, his eyes cold and accusatory. I pulled my gaze away and tried to look to the cell beside me, but there was nothing but wall and dark corridor to see. "And what about you, Morley?" I yelled in his direction, frustrated that he had stayed silent this entire time. "Don't you want to tell me what an ungrateful sister I am?" Because if he did, I'd rather

get it over with now. If I were going to stand with arms outstretched and receive the arrows, I wanted them from all sides. Let the pain come now, all together so I could be done with it. "Nothing to say?" I taunted, my voice tight with anger and hurt. "You'll just let Daggon do all the talking for you?"

Still, he didn't say anything, and somehow his apathy was even worse than Daggon's hatred. I could combat words. I could fight against them and contradict them. I could return anger for anger. But Morley's silence sliced to my core, leaving me with hope that he didn't hate me, but without any actual proof.

Suddenly I was too tired to hold my head up, and I let it drop against the bars of my cell door as I fought mightily against the tears that wanted to come. Then I turned my back and shuffled over to the hard bench, lying down on it and fixing my gaze on the dark, dirty corner of my prison.

Maddox

After stepping out into the palace grounds, the logical course of action would have been to simply leave. Walk down the path and through the great doors of the outer wall.

But then what? If I left Elise here in the dungeon, where would I go and what would I do? I couldn't leave. I couldn't go back to my father and tell him that our Elise had been accused of stealing from the duchess herself and that she was now languishing in a dungeon cell. I wanted to help, but I didn't know what I could possibly do that would be helpful.

So I stood there on the steps, unable to go back, unwilling to go forward, my gut churning with fear and anxiety. I looked out over the grounds, now lit only by torches placed at intervals. I spotted two guards as they stopped to confer with one another, and realized they were looking for White. Suddenly, I had a target for all my anger. I moved down the stairs, slowing my pace as I passed by the guards.

"Gone, just gone," one of them said. "None of the men posted at the wall saw him leave."

"So he's still here?"

"Unless he already climbed the wall."

The second man rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead. "Keep searching. And send someone into the maze." He started walking away,

muttering, "It's a security nightmare" as his armor creaked and his sword *thwapped* against his leg.

I looked up at the palace, trying to imagine Robert hiding away inside, but that seemed unlikely. Festival rats didn't like being trapped inside. I studied the outer wall that surrounded the grounds. It was tall, and while it could be climbed, I didn't think Robert was likely to take that route. He was an illusionist, not an acrobat.

The maze then? The guard had been right, it was an easy place to hide. Plenty of shadows and cover. But with the way the guards' armor tended to announce their movements, I doubted their pursuit would flush him out. He'd hear them coming and give them the slip.

I might as well search it myself, because if I could discover something that had even the possibility of helping Elise, I had to do it. I stepped off the stone pathway and walked toe-to-heel toward the maze, making my steps as light and fluid as possible. Entering the deeper darkness of the close-growing hedges heightened my other senses. My breathing sounded loud to my ears, and the temperature of the air grew just a little colder. As I stalked through the darkness, I both heard and saw the guard that was searching the maze as he approached, a lighted torch in hand. I stepped onto an alternate path and hurried away from the light.

He passed me by without much difficulty on my part.

They would never find White searching that way, which made me think that this was exactly where he was hiding.

I continued to creep through the maze on quiet feet, not knowing how much time was passing, but it felt infinite. After I'd traversed the maze and found both the entrance and exit twice, I decided to look elsewhere.

I searched the main garden paths, sticking to the shadows as I ducked under flower-strewn arches and crossed a tiny decorative bridge over a narrow trickle of water. I climbed up into a tree in the orchard and sat, waiting for any noise or movement, then moved on to the rose garden, all the while hoping that White hadn't snuck out of the grounds before the guards had set the perimeter.

Elise

I'd been closing my eyes, trying to focus inward, when the scrape of metal on metal caught my attention. I ignored it for a few moments more, but when an even deeper sense of unease crept in, I opened my eyes.

Daggon was no longer sitting in the middle of his cell. Instead, he crouched at the door, his arms stuck through the bars.

Saints. He was picking the lock.

A noise of disgust escaped my throat.

He spared me one glance but didn't speak. Maybe he couldn't see me where I sat in the shadows of my cell.

"I'm curious," I said after several minutes. "What comes next? I mean, if you succeed in opening your cell door, you'll be free to run up the stairs and straight into the swords of the guards that I'm certain are keeping watch."

"That's the problem with you," he said as he pushed his shoulder farther through the bars, trying to get the right angle. "You could never see beyond the obvious."

"You mean I didn't see people as nothing but potential coins? Is that what bothered you? I wasn't creative enough to sell someone a restorative tonic one day and then a healing elixir the next after the tonic had made them sick?"

He had the nerve to chuckle. "That was rather brilliant, wasn't it?" "It was disgusting. You're disgusting."

"That may be, but—" He paused as the lock suddenly clicked and turned. Then he looked up at me with a dark grin. "It did give me the upper hand." He stood and pushed the door open, then stepped into the corridor that separated our cells.

I was impressed despite myself, but I didn't let it show on my face. Instead I arranged my face in an expression of boredom. "Good luck getting past the guards," I said with heavy sarcasm.

"Like I said." He approached the door of my cell. "You never see beyond the obvious." He knelt and started trying to pick the lock of my own cell.

My heart flew into my throat. "What are you doing?" I asked, climbing to my feet.

"I'm taking back what you stole from me," he said, shooting a dark look at the brooch at my neck.

I touched the piece of jewelry, then unfastened it, my panic making me think that if I just gave it to him, he would take it and go. But then my more rational self took over, and all I could think was that I had to keep him from unlocking that door.

"No." I ran forward and pushed his hands away from the lock, but he just lashed out and grabbed my arm, pulling on it until the entire right side of my body slammed into the bars. I cried out in pain and struggled to free myself, but he held fast.

"See? You never see the bigger picture. Now give me the brooch and I'll let you go."

I knew that wasn't true, so instead I screamed, hoping the guards would hear but worried that the walls were too thick.

He grabbed my hair with his other hand and pulled. I yelped but managed to hold my left hand as far from him as possible, still clutching the brooch.

"Give it to me!" he demanded, slamming the side of my head against the bars. A pained grunt escaped me, but as I struggled against his hold, I managed to reposition the brooch in my hand and plunge the large pointy pin into the back of his hand.

"Argh!" he roared, but he didn't release me, so I stabbed at him over and over until he shoved me away from him.

I fell to the ground, my head throbbing and dizzy, the right side of my body aching, but with the brooch still clutched in my hand.

Daggon covered one hand with the other, holding it to his chest as he growled and glared at me.

I scrambled farther back.

Daggon bent to retrieve the tools from where they'd dropped on the ground.

As I tried to clear the dizziness from my head, Morley's voice cut through the air. "You're causing more trouble for yourself, Dag." It was said calmly, as if he didn't care if Daggon heeded his warning but he felt obliged to give it anyway. At least he wasn't cheering him on.

Daggon ignored him and kept trying to get into my cell.

I screamed more, hoping a guard might hear. I didn't dare get close enough for him to grab my arms or head again, but the screaming increased the pain in my head, and the guards weren't coming.

Perhaps I could stab him with the brooch again, but I'd barely gotten away the first time. I just needed to keep him from unlocking the door.

An idea struck me and I stepped close, but not too close, and raised my foot, kicking at the door where the lock was. I didn't hit his hands, but I hoped that jostling the lock enough would disrupt his careful work. Lockpicking took precision. So I kicked out.

Not just once or twice, but over and over I kicked at it, pleased to realize that not only did it frustrate his work, but it also caused an even louder racket than my screaming had. The sound of clanging metal thrummed through the whole dungeon.

Daggon tried to grab at my foot but couldn't catch it, so I just kept kicking. I was getting tired and my head was pounding by the time a "HEY!" rang through the dungeon from above.

Guards! My relief nearly made me faint. Instead I took a breath and screamed, "He's out of his cell!"

Heavy footfalls pounded down the stairs, but Daggon was already back in his cell.

The guard came into view. "What's going on?"

I spoke up before Daggon could. "He picked the lock and came out of his cell," I said, jabbing a finger at Daggon, my breathing labored. "Then he attacked me." I pushed my hair aside with shaking fingers so that he could see the blood dripping from the corner of my eyebrow.

"She's crazy," my brother spat.

"Check his hands. I had to stab him with this." I held up the brooch, pointy end up so it could catch the firelight.

"Crazy family," the guard muttered, but then the blood dripping from Daggon's hands caught his attention. He took out his key and opened the cell, roughly searching my brother until he found the small metal tools that he'd used to pick the lock. Then he shoved him back into the cell, making

him fall to his knees. "Cursed festival rats," the guard spat as he locked the cell again. Then he turned back to me.

"Thank you," I said.

He just grunted and held out his hand. "The weapon?"

I had no choice but to hand over the brooch and hope I wouldn't need it again.

He put it in his pocket. "You two really should learn to get along," he said. "You'll be down here together for a long time." Then he turned and walked away as though his words hadn't torn down all my hope.

Did that mean my guilt had already been decided? Was there to be no more inquiry? No more questions?

I cradled my aching head in my hands and stumbled back to the bench, lowering myself onto it and lying down. Was this my life now? This tiny cage? How ironic that I had set out on this quest in order to find my freedom and instead found myself physically caged.

Maddox

It was near dawn, and for all I knew, they'd found White hours ago, but I had to keep looking. So the next time I saw a pair of guards standing near the wall, keeping watch, I crept close enough that I could hear them talking.

They spoke mostly of mundane things, complaining about the extra work caused by inviting so many commoners onto the grounds, asking after each other's families, and even saying some not-so-kind things about the duchess.

"I'll have their heads!" one of them said in a high-pitched mockery of the duchess's words.

They both laughed "Really though," the other guard said, "do you think they're all guilty?"

"Probably."

"So the magician goes free?"

"Maybe. Though the duke won't be happy about it."

"And the duchess will take it out on the rest."

My heart sank even further. They were giving up on finding White. Would they truly assume Elise was just as guilty as her brothers? Would they punish Elise while Robert White was free to roam the villages and continue to pilfer from every pocket he could?

I moved away from the guards as the dim light of dawn filtered through the grounds. I started making my way around the palace yet again, hoping the sunlight might reveal something that I'd missed.

By the time I made my way around to the maze again, the sunlight was bringing the gardens back to color and detail. That's when I saw something white on the ground, right up against the maze's outer wall. I went closer and realized it was a card—a playing card, the kind that White used for his tricks. I picked it up and examined the hedge where it had been and saw that it was not nearly as dense as most of the hedge wall. In fact, when I tried to stick my arm through, I met very little resistance. Was this how White had evaded capture during the night? He'd hidden in the maze and any time someone came looking inside, he would crawl out through this spot and bide his time until they gave up?

I hurried to the nearest guard, nearly getting my head cut off in the process, but after I told them my suspicions, they were willing to set guards on every side of the maze.

"I'll send two men in to search," the captain said.

"Their armor will give them away," I pointed out.

"So then he'll crawl out through one of his hidey holes, and we'll catch him that way."

"Can I go in and look?" I asked, not able to stand the idea of doing nothing now that I felt we were so close.

His expression was suspicious and not very receptive, but finally he said, "Just don't get in the way."

I thanked him and entered the maze quietly. My movements were slow and methodical as I searched. I stopped to just listen at regular intervals, often hearing the movements of the guards sent to search. Eventually I heard the quiet sound of movement on the other side of the hedge from where I crept. Someone was traversing the path, and they didn't have armor on. Because of all my time spent searching over the past hours, I thought I knew how to get there, but it required a roundabout path. I waited until he'd moved farther down whatever path he was following before quickening my pace and making my way around two turns and past a dead end. But by the time I reached the path that I believed he had been on, there was nothing there. So I crept, even more slowly than before, following the straight course until it abruptly cut to the left.

As I went to ease around that corner, the jangle of a chain made me spring into action. I launched myself around the corner, hitting against a body and eliciting a cry of surprise from Robert.

His infernal pocket watch chain had given him away. As we grappled, I raised my voice, shouting as loud as I could, "Here! He is here!"

Elise

A commotion brought me out of my miserable haze and I sat up.

"I'm innocent. I swear, there's been a mistake!"

That was Robert's voice. I pushed to my feet and went to the door, anxious to see for myself that he'd been detained. Two guards were dragging him toward me while he tried to dig in his heels.

When he saw me, he started shouting at me instead.

"Elise! Tell them I didn't do it. Tell them it's a mistake. It was all your idea!" He turned back to the guards. "It was all her idea!"

His accusation stunned me into disgusted silence.

"Quiet, you," one of the guards snarled, dragging him past me and pushing him into the cell on the other side of Daggon.

He continued to shout his protests, but the guards just locked the door and walked by my cell again, muttering, "It's always the same thing. Does he really think anyone comes down here claiming to be guilty?"

Robert kept shouting until the guards were out of sight and we heard the door at the top of the stairs bang shut with a rattling finality.

I dropped my forehead against the bars and closed my eyes as Robert's useless protests quieted and yet another wave of betrayal washed over me.

"Elise," White said.

"Don't speak to me," I snapped.

"But Elise—"

I turned on him. "I trusted you!" I screamed, squeezing the bars violently since I could not reach Robert's throat. "Having my brothers betray me was bad enough, but at least I expected it," I said, throwing one hateful look at Daggon before returning my attention to Robert. "But you! What did I do to deserve that? I thought we were friends."

He let go of the mask of innocence and allowed his face to transform into shrewd knowing. "I'm an opportunist, Elise. That does not change just because I can appreciate a pretty face."

My mouth dropped open and my nose scrunched in disgust. "That's all I was to you? You never cared at all?"

"I cared enough to leave you that riddle, didn't I?"

"You left me in Murrwood and didn't even have the decency to say goodbye," I pointed out, but he just kept talking.

"I invited you to come find me." His eyes raked up and down my figure, then his brow furrowed. "And you did, but you didn't. It seems quite fickle." The arrogance in his voice and posture grated on me.

"Perhaps I just realized how selfish and self-centered you are."

He shrugged. "And thus you were no longer of use to me."

How glad I was in that moment that I'd never let him get too close. If I'd allowed him to kiss me, what other "uses" would he have found for me?

"Besides," he said, resting his forearms on the bars as though this was a normal, casual conversation. "I've always liked your brothers."

I flinched. He'd always liked my tormentors. "So you both agreed it would be fun to see me thrown in prison for something you did?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Would have worked too if your hatter hadn't decided to act like a magistrate." His words turned bitter at the last.

A burst of pride rushed through me. Hatcher *had* acted like a magistrate, and he'd been magnificent. If not for his quick thinking and shrewd questions, I would be the only one in this dungeon right now. Still, the fact that Robert so easily admitted to such a betrayal cut deeply. "I don't understand how all of it could be a lie."

"It wasn't all a lie. I did like you. We had fun together."

"And now you hope I rot in this dungeon?"

He gave another infuriating shrug.

"It won't work," I said. "They won't believe you."

He laughed. "Why not? If both I and your brothers are adamant that you were just as active a participant as we were, what's going to make them believe you're innocent? You had two stolen pieces in your costume."

"That you put there when you came over to show me your card trick." He grinned.

I was horrified and disgusted and furious. There were no words. All I could do was slam my fist into the bars and turn my back on him, retreating to the shadows where I could wallow without being seen. I sat down in the farthest corner of my cell, put my head down on my knees, and cried. He was right. They'd never believe I was innocent.

But at least they also knew of Robert's guilt, of my brothers' guilt, and I owed that all to Hatcher. He had defended me before the duke and duchess. He was like a white knight of legend, and he was the only reason that Robert and my brothers were down here, sharing my fate. That, at least, was some consolation. So I went back to humming my melody—broken though it was by my tears—and as I hummed, I sang the words in my head.

He was only a hatter Worked with fabric and thread She was a maid in the forest Who someone had left for dead

I sang it over and over, adding verses and imagining harmonies, until the creak and clang of a door opening rippled through the air. I lifted my head to listen as several sets of footsteps made their way into the dungeon corridor. The captain of the guard appeared outside my cell, a torch in hand. He peered in at me and then looked at the others.

"We finished our search," he announced before looking at Daggon and then over to where Morley was being held. "Your wagon is fascinating, but it wasn't very good at keeping secrets. It seems you men have been thieving day and night for some time." He looked back at me. "I thought at first that all three of you Wolfe siblings were working together."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he held up a hand and turned to Daggon. "But after speaking with your wife, it was clear she didn't know you two even had a sister. Curious, don't you think?" He then turned to Robert, walking toward the door of his cell. "And as for you. The way you ran and hid, then proclaimed your innocence before we'd ever accused you..." He shook his head. "Idiotic," he mumbled.

What did that all mean? He didn't seem to think I was working with my brothers, so...?

The captain crossed between my cell and Daggon's, then stopped to lean against the bars to Daggon's right. "What about you, Connor, did you hear anything interesting?" He looked over not at his fellow guard, but at the person in the cell beside Daggon's. The one wrapped in rags who'd barely moved the entire time we'd been down here.

The man shifted but didn't sit up. "Want me to snitch on another prisoner, do you?"

"If you wouldn't mind," the guard said politely, like they were friends, or perhaps had a business agreement.

The man snorted. "Girl's innocent," he muttered. "Brothers are terrible people. Other bloke used her up and spit her out, then decided to work with her brothers just to humiliate her and watch her suffer," he mumbled before rolling over and ignoring us once more. I held my breath. He knew I was innocent. Would the captain take him at his word? Could this all be over soon?

The captain let a grin slip past his stoic facade before hiding it again. "Always helpful, that one."

"How do you know he's not lying?" Daggon challenged. "He's a prisoner."

"So long as Connor is fed a steady diet of ale, he's as honest as they come," the captain said as he shoved a key into the lock of my cell and pulled it open. "You're free to go, miss."

I stood frozen for just a moment, hardly believing my luck had changed so thoroughly and dramatically. I used the wall to push myself up, then stepped tentatively toward the door, half expecting him to slam it in my face and sneer that it was all a cruel joke. But the captain just waited patiently, ignoring Daggon's protests, and I walked through unhindered and turned toward the stairs.

I fully intended to walk by Morley's cell without either a word or a glance, but as I passed his cell door, the way he said "Elise" made me pause.

I didn't turn toward him, but I could see his shadow from the corner of my eye. How strange that in this instance, Morley seemed to be innocent, and yet he hadn't bothered to defend himself.

"I—" He didn't seem to know what to say, but I couldn't bring myself to speak first, not after all his silence.

My heart felt like it had been clawed into and left bleeding, and though I fully expected that Morley's words would make the bleeding worse, there was always the chance he would surprise me.

He shuffled closer to the door. "I can't believe I didn't recognize you." I swallowed.

"I was angry when you left." The words didn't surprise me, but the tone was not what I expected from him. There should have been vitriol in his

voice, but instead he was just...musing? "I hated that you took the money, the brooch. But I also couldn't help being just a little proud of you."

A tiny breath sucked past my lips, his words feeding the grain of hope inside me.

"You did exactly what I'd been trying to get you to do for years," he said. "You stole to save yourself."

I nodded, still staring down the corridor, refusing to face him fully.

He let out a dark chuckle. "Good for you."

I heard and felt him move back, away from the door, away from me. So I pulled my feet from the floor and kept walking.

I knew he was only proud because I'd acted like he would—selfish and self-serving—and those were things he valued. But despite how twisted that pride was, I held fast to the bare facts. My brother had said he was proud of me.

Elise

I climbed the stairs out of the dungeon, surprised by the light pouring through the palace windows. It was morning?

I made my way down the spacious but dim corridor with a silent guard walking at my side. I was led to a door, but it wasn't the main palace entrance that we'd entered last evening. The guard opened the door and I stepped out into the side gardens where the acrobats had been playing croquet last night. As I stood on the steps, trying to get my bearings and figure out which way would lead out, the door clicked shut. I looked behind me and found myself alone, the guard having retreated inside.

I looked out on the gardens that held long shadows in the rising sun, trying to see the expansive grounds as freedom, but instead the shadows seemed menacing. That is until I noticed a man pacing back and forth near the front entrance. A familiar man.

My chin quivered as hope bubbled up. "Hatch?" I called out, hardly believing that it really could be him standing there. Had he stayed all night? For me?

His head whipped in my direction. "Lisey!" He sprinted toward me, covering the distance in no time at all, his body crashing into mine and picking me up off my feet.

"They let you go?" he said in my ear as my feet dangled above the ground. "You're free to go? We can go?"

"Yes," I said as I hugged him fiercely in return.

"Good." He set me down, pulling back so that he could see my face. He carefully pushed my hair back, his expression darkening. "There's blood on your face."

I nodded. "Daggon...he got out of his cell...he grabbed me." I shook my head.

Hatcher ran his hands over my hair and kissed my forehead. "I'm sorry, Lisey. I'm sorry."

"I'm all right," I tried to reassure him, though the words were shaky.

He moved back and ran his hands over my shoulders and arms as if ensuring that I was otherwise unharmed. "Let's get out of here and never come back." He wrapped an arm around my back and propelled me toward the main drive.

"Gladly" was my weak reply.

He dropped his arm from around me and grabbed my hand instead so that he could quicken his pace. We walked hand in hand, our steps hurried, though we did our best not to run.

"They found Robert." The words sounded dazed, even to my own ears. "I don't know how, but they—"

"I found him," he said, cutting his eyes over to me. "He was hiding in the maze all night." His words and his steps were clipped.

"You found him?" I asked in awe.

He nodded.

I stopped and pulled him around to face me so that I could throw myself at him, hugging him fiercely. "Thank you, Hatcher." The words were wildly inadequate.

"Of course," he said as if his actions had not been monumental. "I wasn't going to leave you."

He wasn't going to leave me. He'd had every reason to walk away and wash his hands of me, but he hadn't. Not only had he waited, but he'd *fought* for me, with both his words and his actions.

I wanted to stay wrapped in his arms, but instead, I pulled back to look in his eyes for one moment, and I saw the relief and joy that I felt reflected back in his eyes. But there was also a sort of desperate longing pinching his brow that I understood all too well. We were both ready to get out of here and finally have a moment to focus on us, so I took his hand and tugged him toward the gate.

We remained silent as we passed the bowers and rose gardens and sculpted bushes.

As we neared the gate, my throat tightened, wondering if they'd stop our departure, but they opened the gate without hesitation. I even thought I saw

one of the guards giving Hatcher a nod of respect. We stepped through the door, and after a few strides, my breathing didn't feel so tight. I really was free.

"Why would Robert do that?" Hatcher asked into the silence. "I thought you were friends."

"So did I. I asked him the same thing, and he just said that he's an opportunist," I bit out. "So once I insulted him in Lorta—"
"Lorta?"

I looked up at him, my mind starting to reach back to events before the palace, and my lips curled tentatively into a smile. "Yes. Lorta."

His brow twitched as though trying to solve a puzzle, then he pulled me off the main road so that we were out of sight of the palace and alone.

Then he took both of my hands in his and searched my face. "What is that look?" he asked.

"What look?" I could only imagine what expression had crossed my face as I'd thought back on Garnet the mystic and all the profound knowledge she'd pulled out of me.

"Like you know a great secret."

Did I? "Yes," I realized. "I suppose I do," I admitted, my eyes desperately searching his. "It's a secret I've been keeping even from myself," I said, dipping my eyes to the ground.

"About what?" He squeezed my hands, clearly anxious for me to just say it already.

"About what I am, who I am...and who I love..." I looked boldly into his eyes, the space between us waning with each moment.

His eyes darkened and he stepped closer. "Who you love?" "Yes."

He inched forward as his breathing turned audible. "Who? Tell me who." "You, Hatch," I said with bravery and vulnerability. "Of course it's you." The weight that lifted from my chest with that confession nearly stole my breath.

A look of wonder brightened his face and he let out a relieved and breathy laugh. "Of course it's me," he said before stepping into my space and wrapping his arms around my waist. His muscled arms surrounded me, one hand at my back, the other holding the back of my head as his mouth found mine, kissing me tenderly but pulling back all too soon. "It's about time you realized that—"

I cut him off, pressing my lips to his and holding him there. One small kiss was not nearly enough. He seemed to agree, because he willingly sank against me, his body going slack and his movements falling into a gentle rhythm as he explored my lips with his own.

A tremendous warmth washed over me, and encompassed in that warmth were feelings of safety and love...and of being *wanted*.

I was wanted. Not just by anyone, but by Hatcher. Hatcher who was good and kind. Hatcher who was patient and handsome and sturdy.

He pulled back and looked down into my face as he ran his fingers across my hairline and down to my ear, making me close my eyes as I shivered. When I opened them again, he was smiling down at me.

"I tried to tell you how I felt before you left."

I blinked in surprise. "You did?"

The corner of his mouth rose along with one eyebrow, creating an adorable look of confusion. "Of course. When I told you that nothing would make me happier than taking care of you every day."

I dropped my forehead against his chest. "I can't believe I was so stupid." "Not stupid. I should have been braver. I should have told you exactly how I was feeling."

I raised my head so I could look up at him. "I'm not sure I would have been able to hear that. Yes, I feel like a fool for running after Robert, but what I learned in Lorta..."

"Whatever happened in Lorta," he said, "I will forever be grateful for it." I moved closer and pushed my fingers up into his hair. "Me too."

He closed his eyes on a sigh and when he opened them, they were bright with emotion. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?" he asked in a fierce whisper that made my eyes burn with tears of joy. "How *long* I've loved you?"

I shook my head. "I don't think I do," I admitted.

"Well then," he said. "I suppose I'll have plenty of time to show you." He grinned just a little wickedly and I reached up to pull him down to me. He pressed his mouth to mine, kissing me with a new fierceness, and I was happy to settle into the warm tingles produced by the way he held me, running his hands up my back and kissing me until I felt quite melted.

Maddox

After I'd kissed Elise so long and so thoroughly that we were both a little breathless, I took her by the hand and led her down the hill and through the labyrinth of festival tents. Admittedly, we stopped along the way a time or two so that I could remind myself just how wonderful it was to kiss her. But eventually we made it back to the tent.

There, we found my father pacing outside the tent, his arms tightly crossed, his stance rigid.

"Dad," I said as we drew close enough.

His head shot up and he ran to us, pulling both Elise and me into a fierce hug. "Everyone was talking about it. They said you'd been caught stealing from the duchess herself. I knew it couldn't be true, but—" He pulled back and looked at Elise. "You were imprisoned?"

Elise nodded, her eyes a bit haunted.

"They threw her in the dungeon," I said quietly.

He looked just as horrified as I felt.

We sat around the fire, explaining the entire evening. As I dabbed at the cut on her forehead and cleaned the blood from her face, Elise told my father about her brothers and their history. After I'd settled on the log beside her, she recounted what had happened in the dungeon in more detail than she'd told me earlier, and I had a difficult time maintaining my composure. What if they hadn't let her out? What if they had believed her wretched brothers or that feckless magician? I couldn't think about it. Instead, I continually reminded myself that Elise was here—with me, safe—and through it all, Elise never let go of my hand, and regularly leaned in to rest her head on my shoulder. My father listened with sympathy and relief, and by the time we'd explained it all, each of us was exhausted.

The festival would start in only a couple of hours, but we all needed to sleep. We went inside the tent, where it would be dimmer and quieter than outside, and got ready to bed down, my father planting his bedroll decisively between Elise and me. "Good thing I didn't send you on your own," he murmured to me, and all I could do was smile.

He had a point. If I had made the trip on my own, I would have found myself alone with Elise for the remainder of the week and the journey back; and though that prospect was so appealing that I didn't dare dwell on it for too long, I knew it was better that my father was here.

Saints, I needed to marry that woman as soon as possible.

We all slept for several hours and then reluctantly got up and opened for business. Though Elise and I wanted nothing more than to leave Winhaven right away, my father convinced us to stay. We had skipped the festival in Faehurst, which meant that if we left now, we would have traveled all this way for only a few days of sales. And though I was loath to stay in the city where Elise had been imprisoned for any amount of time, I knew he was right. We needed the entire week here to make our travel worth it.

So we stayed. Elise didn't venture to different parts of the festival grounds to perform as she usually did. She stayed within eyesight of our tent. She drew a larger crowd than usual, and I didn't know if it was simply the new city or if it was the scandal surrounding her that brought the young and old alike to sit at her feet and listen to her sing her stories.

Business was brisk, so I stayed at our tent, answering questions and selling what I could. Elise was close enough that I often heard the melodies of her songs, but I couldn't make out the words. Most songs I knew by heart and could hear the words rolling through my head as soon as I recognized the tune, but today there was one melody I couldn't identify. It was late afternoon when I heard it for the third time, and she had moved close enough that I could finally understand the words. I paused in my work so that I could listen to her new song, stunned when I heard the first line.

He was only a hatter Worked with fabric and thread She was a maid in the forest Who someone had left for dead

Though covered in dirt Her clothing ragged He saw her smooth cheeks Though the scars were jagged

He brushed the dirt from her arms
He shook the leaves from her hair
He loved her back to life
Though she'd been told that no one would care

When lying friends abandoned

And deception had made her small He filled her with love and light So her heart and her mind grew tall

Tall as the trees and birds in flight She found herself when he offered her light

I wanted nothing more in that moment than to offer Elise my full heart. I wanted to ask her if she would marry me, but as she finished her song with a smile and walked over to me, I held my tongue. I couldn't propose now. I couldn't ask her to make that decision only one day after facing the traumatic prospect of rotting in a dungeon for a crime she hadn't committed. And I couldn't propose when we'd be spending the next week sleeping on the cold ground with my father between us.

I'd never seriously courted a woman before, but there was no time like the present.

When she stepped close enough, I wrapped her in my arms. "You wrote a song for me."

"Yes, I did."

I sighed into her hair. "I hope I can always offer you light."

"And I hope I can do the same for you."

I chuckled. "You already have. You bring light to me every time you run into the tent, wanting a change in wardrobe. You give me light when you sing. You give me light just by sitting by my side." I pulled back just enough that I could look down into her face. "I know you have a lot of darkness you carry."

Her brow pinched and I could see a little of that darkness dim her eyes.

"But I'm going to do my best to help you through it." And for now, that was all I would say. I wouldn't press her for more details or more of her feelings on what had happened last night. But when she was ready, I hoped she knew that I would listen to all of it.

Elise

When we departed Winhaven on Monday, it was with relief and a promise to myself that I would never return there.

There had been many gawkers during those four days. People who watched me perform because they'd either been there to witness my humiliation or they'd heard it from others. Some were only curious. Others took a moment to give me a word of sympathy.

We left at first light, having all woken up anxious to be gone. During the next three days, I told Hatcher all about my journey from Lorta to Winhaven. I described the ocean and the trails I'd taken. I told him about the rhythm of the sea and the song I'd made up about the wolf mother. He asked me to sing it for him and I did, surprised by the tears that rolled down my cheeks as I did so.

I told him about seeing the wolf with her pups and the strength it had given me. I told him about Garnet's advice to dig down and find who I was. He listened to all of it, his hand constantly finding its way into mine or reaching out to stroke my hair. I reveled in all of it. There was no discomfort in Hatcher's affections, no nervousness either. It was just new and lovely and filled my chest with such warm delight that I wondered if it would always be that way.

When we pulled into Dressle, the familiar sight of the river and trees was a boon to my soul. I belonged here for so many reasons. It was my home and my community. It was the place that had given me refuge. It was the place where I'd found Hatcher.

Kat screamed and ran to me when she saw I had returned with Hatcher and Marshall. She hugged me while she lectured me, demanding answers and dragging me into the house. Didi and Twyla asked me to tell them stories before bed. Even Mouse and Billy seemed happy to see me. But late into the evening, it was Hatcher who sat beside me and played with my hair while I told him more about my brothers, more about my conflicting emotions. I hurt over their callous behavior and yet felt guilty that they were now imprisoned. I was glad to be rid of them and yet still wished they had approved of me. Hatcher just listened to it all and told me how much he loved me.

The next day, I went with Kat to open the shop while Marshall and Hatcher repaired a portion of the thatched roof that had started leaking in their absence.

Around midmorning, Kat ran out to deliver something, so I was alone when the shop door opened and Garnet walked in. The moment she saw me, she stilled and just stared.

"Garnet," I said, shocked. She looked different. Her crown of leaves was gone, and her clothes looked like they were meant for travel. "What are you doing here?"

The way she studied me, her eyes flitting from my eyes to my shoulders to my cheeks to my whole frame, seemed like she was looking for something and seeing something, but I could not imagine what. Finally she took a step closer and spoke. "You told me your name, but then you ran off so quickly...and I didn't know how to ask..."

I waited for her to finish, but she remained silent. "Yes?" I prompted.

"You said Wolfe, didn't you? Your name is Elise Wolfe?" She looked almost afraid to ask the question.

"Yes. What about it?" I asked, thrilled to have a chance to speak with her again but finding her presence impossible to explain.

"The reason the story of the wolf woman means so much to me is because it reminds me of my own daughter."

My brow twitched, confused by the story. "Oh?"

"Yes." She edged a little closer. "You see, she married a wolf."

That was an odd thing to say. "I don't understand," I confessed, though I could tell by the haunted look in her eye that this story held great pain for her. "Do you mean he mistreated her?"

She shook her head. "Not the animal. She married a man with the last name of Wolfe."

My brow jumped up, my mind immediately going to the woman who now performed with my brothers—Daggon's wife. Was she Garnet's daughter? "I'm sorry. I never met my brother's wife, but she was there in Winberg, just last week."

She shook her head even more violently. "Not your brother, my dear. Your father."

It took several moments for her meaning to become clear in my mind, and even then, I didn't believe it until she said the words out loud.

"I believe my daughter was your mother. Eliza Wolfe."

My knees nearly gave out and I stumbled back a step.

"Was that your mother's name?" she asked, her voice hoarse with hope and fear. "Are you my Eliza's daughter?"

My mouth gaped, too stunned to speak, but I managed to nod.

Her face lit up with relief and joy, and she stepped forward, reaching out a tentative hand to cup my cheek. "You were so young when your father

decided it would be best to stick to the southern route." Her hand trembled and she swallowed before asking, "Where is your mother?"

I closed my eyes, hating that I had to be the one to say these words to my own grandmother. "Gone" was all I managed.

She nodded even as a tear slid down her cheek. "I thought as much, but there was always the hope."

Tears flooded my eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't be sorry, dear. You are here," she said, looking down on me with motherly love. "I found you."

A wave of affection washed over me. "Are you really my grandmother?" I asked, afraid to believe it.

She nodded. "I am." She reached for me and I wrapped my arms around her, laying my head on her shoulder and letting her rock me like I was a little girl. Her embrace felt familiar. Whether that was because I felt a connection to her as family or because she was so physically similar to my mother, I couldn't tell. But the feeling of *home*, of *belonging* that she gave me, healed another part of my heart.

She stroked my hair for several moments as I cried and then asked, "What happened to your father? Your brothers?"

Her question made me sob in earnest, my knees going so weak that I sank to the ground.

I told her the whole story, haltingly, arduously. I told her about my father dying and my mother leaving, and my brothers hating me.

And when Kat returned, looking very concerned to see me crying, I introduced her to my grandmother.

I had a grandmother.

When Dorothy stopped by to bring us lunch, I introduced her as well, and Dorothy immediately invited her to dinner.

She and I walked back to the house together, and I was grateful to find Hatcher outside, cutting wood. "Hatcher!" I ran toward him, too excited to keep to a walk.

He grinned when he saw me. "Lisey, you're back early."

When I reached him, I grabbed hold of his hand and pulled him toward my grandmother. "I want you to meet someone."

He trotted along behind me until we stood right in front of Garnet. "Hatcher, I would like you to meet"—I reached over and took hold of her hand—"my grandmother."

Garnet smiled, her eyes bright with tears. When I looked to Hatcher, he was stunned and smiling. "Your...grandmother?"

I nodded vigorously. "And Grandmother—Garnet—Grandma"—I didn't know what to call her, but she just smiled—"this is Hatcher. He's the one I..." I swallowed.

Her eyes lit with understanding, and she turned her attention to Hatcher. "You are the one?"

He gave an adorable shrug.

"Oh, dear boy," she said and pulled him into a hug.

He laughed and hugged her back, looking over her shoulder at me. "You have a grandmother?"

My hands were sandwiched together and pressed against my mouth as I happily bounced on my toes. "So it would seem."

As we turned toward the house, Hatcher's chore forgotten, I launched into my explanation, which I then had to start over once we'd gone inside.

Each time I was able to introduce her to someone as my grandmother, I thrilled to say the words. She was so kind and quirky and eager to hug me, but she also took care not to overwhelm me. I told her about my life and travels. She told me how she'd lived in Viago for a long time, but after her husband died, she'd gone to Murrwood, hoping to see her daughter pass through with the festival crowd. She hadn't realized that my mother had died the year before. She'd seen the wolf wagon on occasion, but she didn't connect it with Eliza. It had changed and improved since my mother had ridden away on it with Henry Wolfe, and since neither Henry nor Eliza had been with it, she assumed it belonged to someone else.

"And how did you know I was here?" I asked the next morning as she sat with me in the Hatchers' home, darning socks at three times the speed that I did.

"I asked a lot of people," she said as she looked at me with a teasing glint in her eye—one I was learning to recognize was uniquely hers and very much a part of who she was. That's what made her such a great mystic. She loved people, and she found joy in teasing those who came to her with dramatic warnings or gentle nudges in the right direction. "Eventually, enough had told me you resided in Dressle that I was persuaded to trust them." She swallowed as she looked over at me with wet eyes. "And I'm very glad I did."

I set aside my work and curled up in my chair facing her. "Tell me about my mother."

Maddox

I had it all planned out—how I would propose. Since arriving back in Dressle, every minute I waited felt like a minute too long, and yet I couldn't do it now. Elise had been miraculously reunited with her grandmother—a grandmother who was kind and seemed to truly love her and want her. After suffering so much heartache with her father's death, her mother's disappearance and her brothers' treachery, she deserved to have as much time as possible to get to know her grandmother.

If only that time wasn't preventing me from asking her to be my wife...

Elise

It was dawn. I was sitting by the tiny stream that ran behind the Hatchers' home. The sun hadn't peeked its head up over the horizon yet, so the stream and grass and trees were still just shades of gray, waiting to be brought to life by the golden light of day. I'd spent so much time with my grandmother over the last three days, and though I hated the idea of missing any time with her, I did find myself longing for just a little bit of solitude. So I'd come out here before anyone else was awake to be with myself and my thoughts.

I was also missing Hatcher. He'd been nearby a great deal, but hardly ever near enough to speak with him or hold his hand. The way that lack made my whole body achy and uneasy was a testament to how strong our attachment was.

How was it that I hadn't seen that before? Had I really taken him so much for granted, believing he'd always be there for me, and thus not recognizing how much brighter my world was with him in it? Yes, I supposed I had.

The sun burst over the horizon and I closed my eyes, enjoying the warmth on my face and the sound of the stream trickling by.

The door opened behind me and I turned to see Hatcher step outside. He held up a hand to shade his eyes from the new day's light and looked around as he closed the door behind him. It took a moment for him to see me, but when he did, his eyes lit up and he jogged forward, practically skidding to a halt and dropping to the ground beside me. "Good morning," he said, enveloping me in a hug.

I returned the embrace, leaning into him so that I could breathe in his warmth and light. "Good morning."

He pulled back but left his arm around my shoulders and rested his cheek on the top of my head.

This. I wanted more of this.

"How is your grandmother?"

I sighed in contentment. "She's well. She exists," I said with a laugh. "I still can't quite believe it."

"How long do you think she'll be able to stay?"

"I'm not sure. Why? Is Dorothy ready to kick her out?" I teased.

Hatcher chuckled, running his fingers up and down my arm. "No, of course not. It's just the longer she's here, the longer I have to wait to ask you to marry me."

I stilled, blinking in stunned silence.

His hand suddenly stopped moving over my skin and he lifted his head. "Did I say that out loud?"

I slowly raised my head to look at him and nodded, too shocked to speak.

"Right." He scratched at the back of his head. "That wasn't how that was supposed to go."

"Did you mean it?" I asked.

He glanced over at me with a nervous and self-deprecating smile. "Of course I meant it."

I chewed on my lip, waiting to see if he'd say more, make it more official. When he didn't, I asked, "Then can I just say yes?"

"No," he said immediately, pulling back.

"Why not?" I protested. Confused and anxious and excited.

"Because I had a plan. I had things"—he pulled his hands down his face—"to say. I have something I want to give you."

I clasped my hands together to prevent them from reaching out and shaking him. "So you want me to wait?"

"Yes."

"For how long?" I tried to keep the dismay out of my voice, but it came out as a whine.

"I don't know." He turned toward me, framing my face with his hands. "I just...I've been trying to give you room to get to know your grandmother. I didn't want—"

"Hatcher," I said, grabbing his wrists and resisting the urge to just kiss him quiet. We needed to keep talking. This wasn't the time to throw myself at him.

"Yes?"

I paused, wanting to tell him to just get on with it but also wondering if he wasn't quite ready. "I don't want to rush you, but please don't hold off on my account." There. That was both honest and understanding.

His gaze delved into mine. "Are you certain?"

"I am the *most* certain I could be." I tried to communicate with my eyes just how much I was ready for him to ask me.

He chewed on the side of his lip for a moment, studying my face, thinking. "All right." He abruptly pulled away and got to his feet.

"You're leaving?" I asked when he turned toward the house. "Now? In the middle—"

He turned toward me and held up his hands to stop my protests. "I'll be right back," he said, walking backward. "Just stay here."

"Ugh!" I groaned and fell back in the grass.

The door opened and shut as he went inside. This was so unfair. But also incredibly exciting and romantic. I loved that Hatcher wanted to do it in some special way, but I hoped he knew that I didn't need anything fancy. I just needed him.

I heard the door open and sat up to look at the house. He came out with something held behind his back. "Will you close your eyes?"

"Of course," I answered with a smile and closed my eyes as he came closer.

"Keep them closed," he said as he came around to sit on the ground in front of me. He took my hands in his, running his thumbs on the back of my fingers. "All right," he said. "Open them."

I opened my eyes to see him sitting before me, his face bright and nervous. "Elise," he said, his voice quiet.

"Yes, Hatch?" I scooted a little closer so that our knees touched.

"You know I love you. Everything that's good in the world, I want that for you. But that's not possible, so I'm hoping that having a man who appreciates and adores you might be enough."

I could hardly control my smile, and my vision was blurred.

"My family has considered you a part of us for three years. And they will love you always, no matter what. But they don't love you the way I do. So if you'd be willing, I'd like to make you *my* family. Lisey, will you marry me?"

I nodded my head, the tears running down my face preventing me from yelling yes the way I wanted to, so everyone could hear me.

"Good," he said, sounding relieved. "Come here." He pulled me closer and leaned in, resting a hand on the side of my neck and kissing me softly.

When he pulled away, I made a noise of protest, but he just grinned, got to his feet, and pulled me up with him. I pushed my hands into his hair and kissed him more, happy to get lost in the bliss of this moment.

When we pulled apart, I heard cheering coming from the house. I looked over to see multiple faces pressed to each window. Kat, Twyla, and Didi looked on from the loft. Dorothy and Marshall were at the kitchen window with Mouse squished between them. And my grandmother looked through the window of the main room, holding Billy in her arms.

Hatcher and I both laughed and waved until I heard Dorothy shooing everyone away from the windows.

Once I recovered and swept the tears from my cheeks, I framed his face with my hands, marveling that this wasn't a dream.

"Would you like your present now?" he asked.

"You got me a present?" That explained his retreat to the house.

"I *made* you a present." He sat down again, and I sat with him, keeping one of his hands trapped in my own as he reached behind him. He pulled out a small bundle of material that he set in my lap. It was a cream hat, colored with dusty rose accents, trimmed in lace and ribbon.

I held it up, admiring the fine workmanship. "What's this?"

"I'm hoping you'll wear it for our wedding," he said.

I looked up at him, stunned by the sweet gesture, made even sweeter by the uncertainty in his eyes. "You made my wedding hat?" He shrugged as if it was of no consequence.

I hugged it to my chest. "I would love nothing more than to wear this." He smiled. "I hope you like the colors."
"I do."

He ran his hands over the brim as he explained. "You always look lovely in the starling costumes, but those clothes were meant to hide you and turn you into someone else. I wanted to use the opposite colors, and I didn't want any veil to hide your face. This is light and bright to remind you that you never have to hide from me. And I always want you to be just who you are."

I got up on my knees so that I could hug him properly. "I cannot imagine how I got lucky enough to find you," I admitted. "You have given me all that's good in the world. You've given me safety, love, and comfort. How can I ask for anything more?"

His smile was full and his eyes shining as he tightened his arms around my waist and then kissed me softly.

The End

If you would like to read the story of the girl in the red cloak who helped Elise escape from her brothers, this is Chapter One of Emeline's story...



Tales of Winberg: Book Two

Chapter One *Before*

I was banking the kitchen fire for the night when I heard it—a barely audible thump at the back door. I sat back, rubbing the soot from my hands with my apron, and bent my head to listen.

It came again: a dull thud sounding against the thick wood. It was late, past midnight, and I couldn't think of any good reason for someone to be calling at the kitchen door. For a moment I thought perhaps I should fetch a guard or inform the housekeeper, Mrs. Braithwhite. I was only twelve, after all. But then I realized if someone were here to attack, they would hardly go through the trouble of knocking. Plus, I didn't like Mrs. Braithwhite.

A drizzle of rain had started earlier in the evening, and I could still hear the drops shushing against the windows. After hearing yet another thump, I threw my thick braid behind my shoulder and crossed to the door, lifting the latch to ease it open. I peeked out, not really expecting to see anything untoward, but still wary with the late hour and being completely on my own here in the kitchen.

I saw nothing but the black of night until a movement at my feet caught my attention. A lump of fabric rested to the side of the door, and a hand raised as if to give another pitiful tap on the wood. I threw the door open and fell to my knees in the doorway. The lump of fabric was a cloak enshrouding a waif of a girl slumped against the wall in an attempt to stay out of the rain. "Miss?" I pushed her hood back so that I could better see her. "What are you doing here?" Her adolescent face was pale and gaunt, her dark red locks plastered to her cheeks and neck. My heart lurched with pain at the pitiful sight. What had this poor girl been through?

She opened her eyes with some effort and though she looked at me, it seemed as if she didn't really see me. I touched her forehead. "Fever," I murmured to myself. I had to get her inside.

Pulling her wet arm over my shoulder, I wrapped my own arm around her back and hauled her across the threshold before kicking the door shut. She did her best to stand and walk, but she had no strength. It was a good thing she was thin. I was small for my age and couldn't boast any great strength, though I was quite compact due to my years of service.

Once I had her in front of the fire, she lay before it, stiller than she should have been, as I coaxed the coals back to life. "Where did you come from?" I asked, though my mind spun with many more questions. Why had she been wandering so late at night? Did she have a home? I knew I'd never seen her around Bridgefield before, so she certainly didn't work for Master Damian and Princess Marilee.

Perhaps she was from a neighboring estate and had become lost. Though why she would be wandering this late, I could not account for. The only reason I was down here was because Princess Marilee had been having difficulty sleeping and asked for some tea. How fortunate that I had returned to bank the fire when this poor soul collapsed at the back door.

Once the flames were growing, I turned back to the girl. Looking at her face in the firelight, I realized she was not only thin, but young, close to my own age, and her pale face contrasted dramatically with the red of her hair. I put my hands on either side of her face, forcing her to focus on me. "What is your name?"

Her glassy eyes fought to focus on me, her lids blinking slowly. "Miriam," she answered, though her trembling made her voice shake.

"Why are you here, Miriam?" I asked. "Are you lost?"

"Hunter," she said as tears filled her eyes. "I need Hunter."

Hunter? "The footman?"

"My brother." She squeezed her eyes shut. "Please. I don't have anywhere else to go."

My heart squeezed. This poor girl. Her pale skin and nearly skeletal frame spoke of an ongoing illness.

"I'll get him." I stood and ran to the sickroom that was just down the hall. Perhaps I should have tried to get her in there, but it was all I could do just to pull her in from the cold. I grabbed a blanket off of the narrow bed and brought it back to drape over her. "I'll be back."

Grabbing my lantern, I slipped from the kitchen and made my way to the servants' quarters. I wasn't familiar with where each of the servants slept, certainly not the men, but I did know which room was Hunter's. I was far more familiar with Hunter than I should have been. I had noticed him the first day that he came to work at Bridgefield. He was several years older than I was. Sixteen, maybe seventeen. There was something about him—his smile and his kind eyes—that brought a bit of light into this dark house.

The house wasn't actually dark. It only felt that way. There had been a bit of light when Princess Marilee had first arrived after their marriage, but then her light had started to dim. Because of Master Damian. Because of Mrs. Braithwhite. Because of this house.

So Hunter's arrival three months ago had felt like a much-needed breath of fresh air. It was difficult not to be distracted when he was around. I wanted to watch him and soak up his good humor.

My fascination was not reciprocated. In fact, I doubted that Hunter had any idea that I even existed. At least I could do this for him though. The girl in the kitchen was his sister, and she clearly needed him right now.

When I reached his door, I hesitated for just a moment before giving three sharp knocks.

After only a moment, he opened the door with mussed hair and far less clothing than I should have been privy to. It took him several moments to clear the confusion from his eyes. "Yes?"

I shook myself from my momentary stupor. "Your sister" was all I managed to get out. He was suddenly far more awake. "Miriam is here?"

I nodded. "She's ill." I hoped that would be enough of an explanation. I knew that my few words frustrated some people, but I could never seem to push out more than a few at a time. More words meant more people who could hear me and more opportunities to get into trouble.

He turned away, not bothering to close the door as he grabbed for a pair of trousers and slid them on. "Where?"

"Kitchen," I answered, averting my eyes.

He pushed past me, hurrying down the corridor while still tucking in his shirt.

I hurried to keep up with him since he had not taken the time to light a lamp of his own. We moved swiftly but quietly. Years of service had taught us both to move without drawing attention to ourselves. Our footsteps whispered across the woven rugs and down the steps leading to the kitchen. Reaching the bottom step, Hunter ran the length of the room and fell to his knees in front of Miriam. "Miri?"

Her eyes fluttered open. "Hunter. I'm sick. They wouldn't let me work anymore because I'm sick."

"I know, Miri. I know." He picked her up, cradling her in his arms, no doubt getting his own clothing wet with the effort.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"We have to get her back to my room."

"Sickroom?" I gestured toward the hallway.

He shook his head. "She's not employed here. Mrs. Braithwhite would never allow her to be here, much less use the sickroom."

I nodded, knowing he was right. The housekeeper would not bend the rules for Miriam, no matter her plight. Mrs. Braithwhite had been unyielding and unforgiving since I'd come to Bridgefield after my parents died a year ago. Harboring someone who didn't belong would be out of the question.

We retraced our steps, but at a slower pace. I entered his tiny room, holding the lantern aloft as he placed his sister in his own bed. I shut the door behind me, anxious to have Miriam out of sight.

"Why didn't you come to me earlier, Miriam? Or at least send me a message?" His whisper was part desperate worry and part fear of discovery.

"I thought I was getting better. And then when they let me go, I couldn't very well find a messenger." I could see her body already relaxing into the warmth and comfort of the bed, though she continued to quiver with fever.

He sighed. "Last week your fever was gone. When did it return?"

"Today."

"That's why they threw you out?" His voice sharpened with indignation.

She shook her head. "It was after they tossed me out. They had already given me four days to rest, but when I tried to return to my work, I couldn't do it quickly enough. I didn't have the strength." Another bout of tears overtook her. "I truly tried. I really did, but I couldn't haul the buckets of water up the steps. They said I had to go if I couldn't do the work."

"Oh, Miriam," Hunter murmured as he brushed her hair back from her damp head.

"I was going to go into the village, see if I could find some work there, but then I realized the fever was coming back. That's why I started walking here. I knew I didn't have a choice anymore. I'm sorry, Hunter. You shouldn't have to take care of me."

"You're never a bother." He leaned his forehead against hers. "Rest. I'll be back soon." He stood and gestured for me to follow him out into the corridor.

He leaned against the door, closing his eyes for a moment before looking at me. "Please give me some time to sort this out before you inform Mrs. Braithwhite."

I blinked in surprise. "I won't tell."

He looked genuinely confused. "You won't?"

I shook my head. "I'll help."

"Why would you wish to help?"

"You need it," I said, lifting one shoulder. "She needs it."

His brow raised. "I'm surprised you'd be willing to risk your position by stooping to subterfuge."

I smiled to myself, thinking of the times I'd helped Aunt Beatrice get things for Princess Marilee that her husband would not allow.

He took my lack of response in stride and dragged his hand over his face. "I'm certainly in no position to refuse help." He let out an exhausted sigh. "She keeps trying to work before she's fully recovered. What she needs is to rest, but of course no one wants to give a servant a free room while she recovers for possibly weeks."

"She's sick often?"

He gave a solemn nod, his shoulders heavy. "The past six months, it seems as if she's sick more often than she's healthy."

My eyebrows pinched together. "So they threw her out?"

"She hadn't worked there for long, so she didn't get a chance to prove her worth before she fell ill."

I chewed on my lip, then asked, "Your parents?"

"Long gone."

I swallowed, absorbing the hard facts, then looked at him, waiting for him to ask something of me. I could be useful. I could if he'd just give me a chance.

He scrubbed his hand through his hair, then pulled on a handful before looking to me again. "Can you get food? I'm sure she needs to eat and drink."

I nodded.

"We'll need rags and water to keep her fever down." He hooked a hand around the back of his neck, trying to think like a nursemaid when he was just a brother who cared. "Her clothes are wet and dirty, but I don't know where I would get a clean night dress for her."

"I have one."

The shock on his face was almost comical. "Are you certain?"

I nodded again.

He looked a bit bewildered, his head shaking back and forth. "I don't even know your name."

I tried not to let that bother me and simply answered, "Emeline."

"Emeline. I don't know how to thank you."

I looked away, embarrassed. "It's nothing."

He didn't reply, and when I convinced myself to look up at him, a ghost of a smile flitted across his mouth.

I took a deep breath. "I'll...be back." With the food and the nightdress, but, "You can get rags and water?"

He gave a firm nod and we both went about our designated tasks.

I returned with one of my nightdresses draped over my arm and a bowl of warm broth in hand. I vacillated between raising my fist to knock and reaching for the latch to let myself in. Had Hunter returned yet? If so, did he expect me to let myself in, or to maintain appropriate formalities and knock? I knew he needed to keep Miriam's presence a secret and my knocking could potentially be heard by someone.

I huffed in annoyance at my own nervousness. Hunter had referred to this plan as subterfuge, so he couldn't be too angry if I left formality by the wayside. I reached for the latch, but the door opened before I touched it.

I jumped, struggling to keep the broth from spilling as I recovered from the fright of having Hunter suddenly appear in the doorway. He wrapped his hand around my wrist, trying to steady the bowl.

"My apologies."

I tried my best to smile my forgiveness.

He took the bowl from my hands. "Come in." He stepped back.

I dipped my head, keenly aware of the fact I was being invited into a room where I should not be allowed. I felt like an intruder.

There was a basin of water and some rags sitting on a chair that was pulled up beside the bed. Miriam lay in the bed, her eyes blinking slowly open and closed, on the verge of sleep. Hunter closed the door and I held out the nightgown.

He took it, nodding in thanks then looking over to Miriam. His eyes darted from her to the nightdress and back again before he started rubbing the back of his head.

Right. I reached to take the garment back. "You go." I nodded toward the door.

He released a breath, relief rolling off of him. "Thank you." He gestured toward Miriam. "For more than just... for everything." He shoved a hand into his hair and pulled. "I'm glad you're the one who found her."

"Me too." I twisted the nightdress around one hand. "Her knock was quiet."

"That's what scares me." His eyes took on a haunted look and I knew what he was thinking. It was the same horror that had run through my own head. What if I hadn't been in the kitchen? Would we have found Miriam's body by the door in the morning, after it was too late?

He stared at Miriam, traumatic what-ifs no doubt running through his head. When he finally looked back at me, I tried to give him a reassuring smile then nodded toward the door.

One corner of his mouth lifted the faintest bit and he let himself out.

Miriam was awake, if only just, but I was able to get her out of her apron dress and chemise and throw the dry nightdress over her head.

She fell back onto the pillow with a sigh. I tugged the dress down to cover her legs then pulled the blankets back in place. "Don't sleep. You must eat."

She nodded and I went to open the door. Hunter looked up from his pacing and hurried over. He stepped in and I stepped out. "Be sure she eats," I said as we passed each other. It was uncomfortable, me giving him orders, but I didn't want him to think that letting her sleep would be better.

He looked at me, his gaze heavy in the silent moments that passed. "Thank you" was all that he said, but it felt like more than just words.

I nodded in acceptance and he surprised me by taking my hand and bowing over it. The action left me frozen in surprise, but he went immediately to pick up the bowl and didn't notice how much his gesture had affected me. I closed the door behind me, my feet moving slowly over the stone floor as I made my way back to the kitchen to bank the fire once again before climbing the stairs to my room. I worried for Miriam and her health. I worried for Hunter and the responsibility that now lay on his shoulders. And I worried for both of them should they be discovered.

A girl determined to fight her own battles.

A boy desperate to protect her at all cost.

And a prowling villain with a deceptively charming smile.

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To My Readers

Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed *The Starling and the Hatter*, please recommend it to others!

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Author's Note

I've had the privilege of surrounding myself with amazing women for my entire life. I have a wonderful mother and fantastic sisters. I have beautiful grandmothers and aunts. I have countless cousins I look up to. Recently, my local friends and I started a book club, specifically to read a book called *Women Who Run With the Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estés. We're not even halfway through it, but already I want to sing this book's praises to anyone who will listen. The lessons that Garnet teaches Elise about digging down, finding her soul voice and putting herself back together are concepts from that book. The story of the mother of wolves is inspired by the folktale of *La Loba* (the wolf woman) which is told in its first chapter. I was just starting to write Elise Wolfe's book when I read that chapter, and I knew it had to be part of her story. If you are interested in digging down and doing the soul work of reconnecting to the wild woman within—the intuitive woman, the woman who *knows*—I cannot recommend her book enough.

Thank you to all of women in my life who have helped me with the knowing. All the mothers who taught me how to mother, the friends who never left me to flounder alone, and my daughters who teach me by example that I can be better.

Thank you to Jana for her editing. Thank you to Kimi, Leiana, and Jessica for beta reading. Thank you to my husband, Cameron, who is always impressed with my work even if he doesn't read it.

About the Author

I love words. I always have. In songs, in poems, in books, in movies—words move me. In my younger years, I dabbled in writing as a therapy and an escape, but I never expected it to become more than that. While deep in the depths of mommying several small children, I took seven years to write my first book, *Just Ella*. During that time, I taught myself how to write a novel through a whole lot of trial and error. Not the most time-efficient method, but it gave me an education I wouldn't have received from a class or a how-to book. Something about the struggle of writing without a formula or rules worked for me. I wrote for me. I wrote from my heart space, and I think that's the reason that *Just Ella* has found room in so many of my readers' heart spaces.

I write clean romance because I love it. I love the discovery of new love. I love the relationship building that's done with looks, words, brushing fingers, and tentative kisses. Jane Eyre is the hero of my youth and taught me that being true to yourself and clinging to your convictions will be hard, but it will bring you more genuine happiness than giving up on yourself ever can.

I am an extraordinarily happy wife, and a mother of five kids. I've lived in Utah, Arizona, Missouri, and Virginia, but my heart is now firmly ensconced in Idaho where we've built a home and a community.

I love chocolate, waterfalls, pretty teacups, the sight and sound of ocean waves, and most especially my husband and my five littles. I love books that leave me with a sigh of contentment, and I aspire to write stories that do the same for my readers.